THE MASTER SPIRIT

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THE MASTER-SPIRIT

"'Alexia — has the time come?'" (Page 163.)

The Master Spirit] [*Frontispiece*

THE MASTER SPIRIT

By

SIR WILLIAM MAGNAY

Author of "The Red Chancellor," "A Prince of Lovers," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN CAMERON

BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1906

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Published October, 1906

Printers
S. J. Parkhill & Co., Boston, U. S. A.

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I	A Dweller in Darkness	1
II	The History of a Compact	9
III	A Society Sensation	23
IV	The Ducal Point of View	37
V	The Man who Guessed	50
VI	The Man Behind	63
VII	The Fiery Ordeal	70
VIII	The Vaux House Case	81
IX	Alexia's Denial	88
X	A Sensational Appearance	94
XI	Herriard and Alexia	102
XII	The Professor is Puzzled	113
XIII	A Mayfair Counsellor	126
XIV	The Tragedy Deepens	140
XV	A Half-Won Victory	152
XVI	Nearing a Crisis	162
XVII	Amazement	175
XVIII	Resurrection	187
XIX	Herriard Stands Alone	196
XX	The Solution of the Mystery	204
XXI	The Mask Falls	214
XXII	The Struggle	229

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CHAP. PAGE
XXIII THE WAYS OF MAYFAIR . . . 240
XXIV HERRIARD'S CONFESSION . . . 247
XXV A RIOT 259
XXVI ALEXIA'S VISITOR 265
XXVII THE END OF THE INTERVIEW . . 274
XXVIII THE FACE IN THE BOX . . . 285
XXIX A PORTENT 297
XXX THE LAST MEETING 308

THE MASTER-SPIRIT

CHAPTER I

A DWELLER IN DARKNESS

THE light on the Clock Tower, that cheerful beacon which assures Britons that good and picked men are kept from their beds to raise the standard of their liberties, and, incidentally, their taxes, had just gone out, sharply, as though glad to announce to yet-stirring London a respite from the babble of lawmaking; and the great workshop of Westminster where the artisans are so many and busy, and the results perhaps so meagre, discharged its crowd into the illuminated night. Out they came hurrying, for the hour was late: the sitting had been animated and prolonged, and even professional, to say nothing of casual, politicians are nowadays too busy in wasting the nation's time not to set a high value on their own. Out they streamed, still chattering and arguing, as became the priests in that great Temple of the Tongue, those of them whose voices were seldom heard and never listened to in the House talking the loudest outside; a varied crew typifying the component parts of their country's greatness. Ministers, bent, fine-drawn and unkempt, as men whose ceaseless rolling of Sisyphian stones gave no time to spare for the clothes-brush, superior Under-Secretaries, some dapper, others affecting a soul and a mission above the niceties of costume, all far more important than any Prime Minister who ever lived, and displaying a pretty contempt for those of the rank and file who took upon themselves to criticise the conduct of the debate; then the mob of hungry politicians, keen hustlers; here sharp-faced wood-cutters in the tangled forests of the Law, each with his axe to grind; there egotistical, opulent tradesmen, members by virtue of contributions to the Party coffers, and with a never-sleeping eye on the Birthday Honours list; now smart men of leisure gained by their fathers' toil, merely adding the House of Commons to their clubs; and so on, with here and there a single-minded politician who imagined, misguided man, that he served his country by supporting his own shade of opinion, seeking nothing for himself, and getting nothing—but influenza and the privilege of leaving to his party the legacy of an inconvenient bye-election.

"Capital speech of yours, Herriard. Won't do you any harm." The speaker was a genial, middle-aged man of fashion who liked to be in the House as he liked to have the *entrée* everywhere, and to stand well with everybody from the Premier to the latest blatant labour member.

"Glad you liked it, Sir Henry. I was rather afraid I should be squeezed out after Darrell's interminable effort," answered Herriard, as he swung himself into a hansom. "Can I give you a lift? "

"Thanks. No. My man ought to be here. Many congratulations. Good-night."

Herriard nodded and leaned back. "Park Lane," he called out to the driver. As the cab turned out of the courtyard the more brilliant lights of Great George

Street fell upon the face within it, that of a young man, interesting enough, handsome and not without character, which latter trait was perhaps just then more strongly accentuated than usual by the illuminating expression of the hour's success. It was a face more interesting by its suggestion of possibilities than by any marked indication of actual, present power.

A short distance up Park Lane Herriard dismissed the cab and walked on. On his left, under a crescent moon, the Park lay slumbering still, and, save for a few nocturnal prowlers, lifeless: in vivid contrast to the still busy, if languid, roll of traffic on the other side of its railings. Herriard, walking briskly, turned up Hertford Street, and presently taking a little used thoroughfare, made his way deep into the intricacies of Mayfair, that curious maze of mansions and slums where Peers live next door to slop-shops, and the chorus from a footman's Free-and-Easy at the public-house across the street may keep awake a dowager countess or weave melody into ducal dreams.

At the end of an out-of-the-way spur from what was half street, half mews, Herriard stopped before the old-fashioned portico of a house the frontage of which, at any rate, was squeezed up in a corner, giving at the same time a suggestion of greater expansion at the back. A curious eighteenth century residence, built on unconventional and, with regard to space, ingeniously utilitarian lines; a house that nineteen out of twenty passers-by would fail to notice and the twentieth would stop to wonder at, since the genuinely quaint has of late years in London given way to the hideously regular or the pretentiously unconventional. As he reached the projecting doorway, Herriard turned sharply and glanced back down the short street. He was alone there; obviously no one without special business would be likely to pass that way. Then he took out a latch-key and let himself in, passed through an octagon hall hung with rare tapestry, went up a broad staircase so heavily carpeted that no footfall could be heard, gave a slight knock at one of the doors on the square landing, and went in.

If the hall and stairway were marvels of costly decoration, the room Herriard had entered was, particularly in contrast to the house's dingy exterior, a still greater revelation, and, in its bearing upon the character of the inmate, should have a short word of description. The walls were hung with dark crimson silk of which, however, little could be seen between the exquisitely toned frames of the multitudes of striking pictures, mostly or all of the French school, with which it was covered. But the whole tone and furniture of the room were French, and French at its most ingenious and its quaintest. The eye fed on a mass of art, simple and applied, never flamboyant, and subdued with such skill and taste that the sense of crowding and profusion was kept from obtruding itself. Everything was novel, unexpected, and yet logically fitted to its place, and the general toning-down effect was aided by the many exquisite bronzes which were placed with an artistic eye about the room. To make an end, the ceiling was a radiant specimen of Angelica Kaufmann's brush-work, showing so little age that the newer glories below could not kill it, and the floor was covered with a rare Aubusson of a design that invited and yet defied analysis.

Projecting from one side of the room was a singular piece of furniture, half bed, half sofa, with a fantastic canopy arranged on carved supports, and with a coverlet of the finest silk. On this couch lay a man. The face that, with the exception of a long thin hand resting on the silken coverlet, was all that could be seen of him, showed a man of singular power and character. The impression which this vivid personality gave might be summed up in one word, concentration: intense concentration physical as well as mental. The dark eyes seemed to scintillate as under the high pressure of a fully charged brain. The black hair was clinched close to the head in tight, crisp curls, the thin lips were compressed, the whole being seemed to palpitate with concentrated vitality, and yet it was a wreck, or why was he lying there?

He welcomed Herriard with a smile which held more than mere greeting.

"You are late, Geof. A field-night of course. Well?"

Herriard took the hand that was raised towards him, then wheeled round a chair and sat down.

"I got on all right."

"That 's well. So you did speak?"

Herriard nodded. "And, I think, made every point you gave me. They beat us by only thirty-three."

The dark eyes lighted up with malicious triumph. "Good! That 's a nasty rap for Master Askew. We had the logic and they the numbers, eh?"

Herriard gave a short laugh. "Certainly we got in our hits every time."

"That 's as it should be."

"They were feeble, and not over-confident after the first hour. It was quite fun to watch them."

"Weaklings! Fancy losing their nerve and half their majority. What are such sheep good for but to follow their leader through the hedge? I wish I had been there."

A look of almost passionate regret crossed the man's face as he spoke the last words.

"I wish you had, my dear Gastineau. We would have had more fun still, and they more funk."

"Congreve? "

"Spoke for twenty minutes. An exhibition of the superior person in the throes of embarrassment. That point of yours about the repudiation of the Colonies hit them hard."

"Ah, you made the most of that. Good! Congreve the Superior could not touch it? " He spoke eagerly.

"Touch it? He could not get near it. I wished afterwards, as I listened to his floundering, that I had elaborated it still more."

Gastineau's thoughts seemed to be far away; as though he were living in the scene his brain reconstructed. "I don't doubt you did very well, my dear boy," he murmured, still preoccupied. Suddenly he flashed out with a spiteful laugh, "The pattern Robert Congreve at a loss! His Baliol quibbles at a discount for once. Faugh! A brilliant party to depend for its allies upon the callow prigs of the Oxford Union! Ah, to be back again! to be back again! " His clenched hand rose and fell; he gave a great sigh of impotence.

"It is hard on you, old fellow," Herriard said sympathetically; "cruelly hard. As it is, I only wish that, as your proxy, I could do you more justice."

The look of almost savage impatience on Gastineau's face had given place to a quiet smile as he replied. "I could not find a better man for my purpose, Geof. We must both of us have patience," he gave a short bitter laugh, "a virtue that you should find easier to practise than I, since its exercise need last but a short time with you, while I must die of it. But the *savoir attendre* pays, Geof, both in the House and at the Bar."

Herriard smiled. "That's just as well, since one has no option but to wait."

Gastineau gave a quick shake of the head. "Many men won't wait; they can't play the game. The world thinks they are waiting, and they flatter themselves so too. But they are really out of it, Geof. They have shot their bolt and missed. Why? Because they were in a hurry. Then there are others, like this fellow Congreve, who get pushed up by the stupid party that mistakes academical show and froth for real power. They manage to keep balanced on their pedestals by the weights of self-advertisement and self-confidence. They act upon the well-known ethical principle that the majority of mankind, being fools too lazy to think for themselves, will appraise a man at his own value, if only he will take care to proclaim the precious figure in season and out. If I were a living instead of a dead man, Geoffrey, I'd blow that fellow out of the water in which he swims so complacently."

Perhaps it was his glance at the malignant face beneath him that made Herriard remark, "You are a good hater, Gastineau."

In an instant the sinister expression had relaxed. "Yes," with a half-apologetic smile. "I hate prigs and, above all, the superior person, with his impudence in assuming a rank in the human category to which he is not in the least entitled. Ah, well, you shall smash him up for me one of these days, Geof. I'm going to make a real, a brilliant success of you. When you are perfect in your guard, I am going to teach you how to hit still harder."

"It is very good of you."

"Nonsense! If you knew how much of selfishness there is in my tuition you would not give me much credit. I should n't expect you to let me use you as a mask for my battery were it not that the benefits of my marksmanship go to you. There, that 's enough of that. Now, about these briefs. I have looked through them."

"They are all simple enough, eh? "

"Absolutely. In Slater *v.* Sudbury Tramway, though, I should make a strong point of the contributory negligence and, as a second shot, cross-examine closely as to the father's actual income and financial position and prospects. I see they claim six thousand. A glorious British jury is pretty sure to find against you, and your best point will be to suggest a try-on and go for mitigation. There you are."

He gave Herriard the parcel of briefs with an encouraging smile and nod of confidence. "Now you had better turn in," he said, "or you won't be fit for Court in the morning. Who tries the tramway case? "

"Gartree."

"That old fool? He will probably misdirect, and give you a second chance. Good-night, my dear boy. So glad you scored to-night."

They shook hands affectionately, and in another minute Herriard, in spite of a long, exciting day, was walking, with the brisk step of that elation which knows no fatigue, towards his rooms in Mount Street.

CHAPTER II

THE HISTORY OF A COMPACT

THREE years earlier there had been an appalling railway accident between Cordova and Seville. Two tightly packed trains had come into collision, with results that had prevented even the Spanish officials from hushing up the *contretemps*, and had sent an electric wave of shudders over the whole news-reading world. Among the second division of its victims, the dangerously, even mortally, wounded, there appeared one name at least which added, in England, at any rate, to the sensational interest which for nearly a week the affair induced. It was that of the most prominent coming man of the day, Paul Gastineau, K.C., M.P., a man who had indeed arrived and who was bound, in French phrase, to go far. Lay politicians were fond of quoting one another that a man of such marvellous brain power and capability for hard work had the easy and certain reversion to the Woolsack: members of his own branch of the profession, if they did not agree with the forecast, let it pass unchallenged; while there were many grains of intentional truth in the chaff indulged in by the other branch when they would declare that the solicitor, who, having a fighting case on hand, failed to retain Paul Gastineau, laid himself open to an action for negligence.

For Gastineau was above all things a fighter, and one who fought with his brains as well as with his tongue; a distinction which they who know courts of law will readily appreciate. An awkward adversary, ever in deadly earnest, who always fenced with the button off; his enemies and defeated opponents, and they were many, said not too scrupulously; but he fought to win, and usually did win, leaving mere niceties and quibbles to the schoolmen; and to have the knack of winning means much, if not everything. It meant much for Paul Gastineau. He became the most talked about man at the Bar, and his enemies being too human to let his praises pass in silence, simply added their voices to the babble that made him known. Our forefathers were stupid enough to regard the envy, hatred and malice that attend on success as something of a drawback; a toll, they called it, paid for being eminent: we know better, and nowadays the wisely successful man regards his detractors as a valuable asset in the working capital on which he pursues the business of eminence.

Parties in the political world do not look far or seek beneath the surface for their allies. Perhaps they are too busy, or too lazy; not to suggest that they are too stupid. Anyhow they have a well-defined leaning towards ready-made reputations: the practice may be expensive and exacting, but it saves trouble. Once Gastineau had become an established success his Party found that they could not do without him, and to that success and to that discovery did a very worthy and somnolent brewer, whose legislative faculties appeared to be somewhat clouded by the fumes of his own ale, owe his more comfortable place of repose in that honourable, if shunted, *wagon-lit* called the House of Lords. Eminent forensic lawyers are often failures in Parliament, and Gastineau was clever enough at the Bar to make wiseacres pretty sure of his falling short in the House. But the shortsighted soothsayers who judge the individual from the aggregate had made no allowance for a certain quality which, beyond his grit, his talent, and his power of concentration, was to be an important factor in the success which he forthwith became. They forgot that he was not altogether an Englishman: there was Southern blood in his veins, a warmer tinge to his mind; he had the vivacity and intellectual *chic* of the Italian added to the determination of an Englishman. So he rose almost at a bound to a high position among the legal members of the House, and with that his position seemed assured.

Naturally when it was seen that this distinguished man was among the victims of the Spanish railway smash, something like a thrill ran through the country which was the stage of his career. Society speculated as to the extent of his injuries and his chance of recovery; his own profession believed, many of them hoped, that, even if he did recover, his flight would thenceforward be a drooping one, while our old friend, the man in the street, always ready with an obvious moral platitude, made much of the impending sword which Fate hangs over the heads of even the most brilliantly successful of poor humanity.

Meanwhile in a poor monastery near an obscure Spanish town Gastineau lay battling with characteristic determination to keep at bay Death who stood over him. When he had been extricated from the wreckage of the train he was placed aside on the ground to await means of removal to the improvised hospital; and he had lain there in what, to a man of his character and ambition, far exceeded the bitterness of death. His spine was injured, he felt no pain, was, indeed, scarcely conscious of the strange numbness and deprivation of all muscular power. But, after the first stunning shock, his mind had become, even for him, abnormally clear and alert, the change from lethargic dizziness had come like the clearing off of vapours from the sun. "Thank Heaven," he muttered to himself, "this is the end, the lightning before death; if only it will come quickly, for all is over with me."

So in a state of savage, resentful impatience he lay there, looking up at the stars, all unconcerned in their cold glitter, types of the all-enduring, which mocked that poor transient clay which had aspired to be a planet in a system so mundane as to admit of railway accidents; and as he looked with despairing eyes he cursed them as the unjust rulers of his fate. Then, for his mind was in too great a state of exaltation to dwell long on any one thought, before him rose and passed as in an extraordinarily vivid panorama the salient incidents of his career, to be succeeded by the principal stages he had been wont justifiably to picture in his future. Never to be. The past was all he could claim now; the present was mere impotence, and the future had vanished at the touch of a sleepy signalman's hand on the wrong lever. He ground his teeth as he thought of it; he had a good deal of cynical philosophy in him, but it failed here, the stake had been too great, the certainty of winning too absolute for him to regard this startling reverse with equanimity. Then he came to review his triumphs, his mistakes, his sins: the last had been mostly pleasant, none the less so, perhaps, that his ambition had required their concealment; he felt he would rather have lived for sin, flagrant, even, and open, than died like this. If he had known how near the end was he would not have been so careful; the world's opinion, bah! What was it worth now? Something came to his mind that since the jar of the accident he had strangely forgotten; something that had sent him there, sent him, as it turned out, to his death. Was there justice in that? Curiously his legally trained mind began to busy itself in weighing the equity of the penalty. It was at least strangely swift, fitting and thorough, but was it just? *Summum jus, summa injuria.* He smiled resentfully at the aptness of the adage, then became conscious that some one was speaking to him, was sympathetically asking as to his hurt. A young man knelt by his side and, with a cushion, tried to make his position more comfortable, talking cheerily to him the while. He was one of the uninjured passengers doing his best for his less fortunate fellow travellers. For the moment Gastineau hated his succourer in a wave of malicious envy; why had not this nobody, this worthy, common-place young Englishman, dull, probably, and mentally circumscribed, with the hallmark of Eton plainly showing, why had not this man been shattered, and he, the brilliant worker, with a name and a place in the world, have gone scatheless? So bitter was the selfish thought that for a while he could hardly bring himself to acknowledge the young stranger's kindness; all he wanted was to be let alone, to die quickly. But the other was not to be easily rebuffed; perhaps he made allowance for a sufferer's state of mind and temper; anyhow he soon won, by tactful assiduity, the wounded man's gratitude, to such a degree, indeed, that when they came to bear Gastineau to the monastery he begged the young fellow not to leave him. There self came in again, since other sufferers might need the young Samaritan's care; but the case seemed desperate, and he could not bear to refuse a manifestly dying man's request.

In such manner began the friendship between Paul Gastineau and Geoffrey Herriard.

Now, within the next few days, chance, that had brought Gastineau to this pass, continued a sequel which had a singular and important bearing upon the future of the two men it had thrown together. Gastineau, having been carried to the monastery and tended by the monks, ever ready for such an office of mercy, lay for days in a semi-comatose condition on the borderland between life and death. He was but one of some dozen victims under the care of these good brothers who, simple and practically dead to the world beyond their narrow sphere, took little heed of their patients' identities; they were to them simply suffering men whose pain called forth their loving service. Presently, to their joy and Herriard's satisfaction, Gastineau, who had seemed doomed, began to mend. He regained in a surprising degree his mental faculties; the doctor shook his head at any idea of complete recovery; he could never walk again, but, with care till the crisis was well past, he would live. It was wonderful, wonderful, he declared; not one man in a thousand would have survived such an injury, but the vitality of the *Señor Inglese* was the most marvellous he had ever known; it was a revelation; and, after all, though most of us die when we need not, there are some subjects whom it is absurdly difficult to kill. But then look at him. Did one ever see such unmistakable power in any one as this dark, resolute Englishman manifested?

Were all mankind built of that steel-like fibre physicians would be few. But to give him the best chance it would be well to remove him to the air of the mountains, and the sooner it was done the better.

Accordingly, early one morning, the patient, accompanied by Herriard, was driven off on a journey of some half-dozen leagues to the restorative atmosphere the doctor had suggested.

Now it happened that, an hour after their departure, death, as though determined not to be twice baulked, struck his dart at one of the patients who remained at the monastery, an Englishman also, a stockbroker of travelling proclivities whose proposed itinerary had scarcely included the River Styx. During the morning the reporter of the local paper, who had, from the columns of a Madrid "contemporary," discovered that an Englishman of note was among the wounded (a fact which he had totally failed to get wind of at first hand), bustled up to the monastery with an eye to "copy" and the unusual importance of a series of press telegrams to the capitals of Europe. Only to be told that the Englishman had died that morning. Too disgusted at a lost opportunity to enquire more closely as to the identity of the deceased, he jumped to the conclusion that it was of course the eminent advocate and distinguished member of the British Parliament who was dead, and hurried off in sorrow to his office, formulating his dispatch by the way. So it came to be flashed abroad that Paul Gastineau had, as expected, succumbed to his injuries.

Herriard reading the news some days after was hot on contradicting it, and greatly surprised when Gastineau forbade him to do so.

"Let it be," he commanded. "It is scarcely a mistake. I am dead. Yes; considering what my life has been, as really dead as many a man who is in his grave. Let it be so, Herriard; give me your word that you will not set the mistake right. I will tell you why presently."

He was so evidently in earnest, that Herriard could not refuse to pass his word, unaccountable as the request seemed. Yet, perhaps, to him who, being a humble member of the same profession, knew well his companion's position and character therein, it was just conceivable that this brilliant and ambitious man could not bear to swallow fate's nauseous dose in public. If we have to make a wry face we need not stand in the market-place to do it.

So it came to pass that the report of Gastineau's death was never contradicted; he was supposed to have been buried in an obscure Spanish grave; obituary notices appeared in the papers, and the very fact that these were allowed to pass unchallenged practically confirmed their truth. This business of a supposititious death would, however, have been difficult to carry out successfully had it not been helped by the circumstance that Gastineau stood, so far as family ties were concerned, almost alone in the world. There was no near relative to go out to Spain and make enquiries, even as a pious duty. Such distant cousins as he had were poor, for he had raised himself; he had never encouraged any advances they had attempted, and they accepted the news of his death with little more interest than the rest of the world. So when presently it appeared that he had left to his friend Geoffrey Herriard a life interest in his property the relations had scarcely an excuse for a grievance.

But when once the deception had been decided on, the busy, acute brain, as keen as ever, set to work strenuously to perfect all the details of the business. And something more. The hidden light was to burn as brightly as ever behind its screen of lies; the dead hand was to strike as viciously as of old, the stilled voice to sting through other lips. Gastineau studied Herriard and came to the conclusion that he was fitted for the purpose he had in mind. He could have done with a little less honesty, but the scheme in its very character contained an element which would neutralize that. Paul Gastineau was not going to play the dead man in aught save in name. He was still a power. The sword with which he had fought and gained so many encounters had snapped in his hand, but he would do some savage execution yet with the jagged dagger it had become. He was not going to lie still and impotently watch the unchecked triumphs of the rivals and enemies he hated and despised. The sole sharer of his secret was clever, ambitious, sick of waiting for his chance, and, by Heaven, he should have it.

Accordingly he one day considerably startled Herriard by proposing to him a scheme, extraordinary enough, yet of obvious feasibility. It was simply this: That they should return to London secretly, and that he, Gastineau, out of gratitude for the services rendered him, should repay service for service by putting the whole of his great talents at his young friend's disposal to the furtherance of his career. Herriard, in a word, was to be the mouthpiece of the stricken man's brain. Gastineau should be the dramatist and stage-manager, Herriard the actor, the manifest form of the invisible spirit.

"I will make you, Geoffrey," he protested, warming to kindle the necessary enthusiasm in his intended pupil. "Your fortune at the Bar, that will be child's play; I will guarantee for you, if I live, something higher, a prize more glorious than mere money. Don't think of that; leave money-grubbing to tradesmen; more than enough for everything a man can want will come of course, for you cannot march successfully through our profession without the accompaniment of the golden cymbals! But if I take you in hand as I propose, there is no saying where you will stop. Because I am at the end of my tether, which has pulled me up with an ugly jerk, because I can do no more for myself, is no reason why, so long as my brains are left me, I should not do something for another man. No, don't begin to thank me; I am not even pretending that there is any virtue in my offer. If," he laughed, "I had still the use of my legs I would n't do it, that 's obvious. I should be too keen on my own career to trouble much about helping another man on. I should, if I had completely recovered, have probably given you a piece of jewellery in acknowledgment of your kindness, and always been your friend and glad to see you. I am selfish; all successful men are, although some contrive to disguise it from a stupid public by advertising the contrary; it has made me; I don't say I could not have got on without practising selfishness, but it would have taken me much longer, and time, you know, is of the essence of our contract with Fate in these days of hustle, rush and scramble. And it is just that very instinct of self that now draws me to you; for selfishness by no means implies ingratitude. Within limits, they who make self their god are keenly grateful to those who serve in his temple. It is just as well to be honest in a matter of this kind, and for neither of us to enter upon a contract such as I am proposing with false impressions. For it must be a contract, my dear Geoffrey; binding by the very seal of our individual interests, and to be honourably kept in its spirit as well as on its material side. It will be necessary for us to believe in one another, to trust one another. Those are general stipulations: the only specific conditions I shall make are, absolute, inviolable secrecy, which you would hardly break, and, what you may find less easy to comply with, implicit obedience to my instructions. I am not surprised to see you look serious at that, but don't misunderstand me. I am not going to put a knife in your hand and send you forth to murder one of my pet aversions. I have no intention of asking you to do anything, to use any weapon which an ordinary man of the world need in honour, our code of to-day, shrink from. But if I want a man hit hard you must hit him hard; you will be my soldier, and when I send you out to fight I don't expect you to patch up a truce and arbitrate. I have always been a fighting man, and as my representative, my proxy, you would have to carry my banner, which bears the motto, 'No compromise.' The rewards would be great. If, as I hardly suppose, my affairs should turn out so that it became necessary for me to levy toll of your earnings, I would take care you were no loser by that. I will get you into the House, and what is more, I will make you master of the art of making your mark there when you are in. That is the real crux. That is where nine out of ten, even clever, men fail. There need be no limit to your ambition. Every day's programme shall be sketched for you, every wrong turning marked with a red cross, every pitfall fenced, the right road clearly marked. You shall see your fellow travellers drop off, but you shall, if you follow my clue, go on triumphantly, each milestone marking a new success. The world is before you to conquer. The world consists mainly of fools, but even fools get in your way, it is all they can do, and there are clever spirits to oppose your progress. The conquest is easy enough, but unhappily men usually find that out too late, when they are too old for the fray. I doubt whether you could do it alone, Geoffrey, at least while the victory is worth having, but with me behind you, you may be irresistible. Is it a compact? "

The compact was made readily enough, the chances of the strange proposal being too dazzling to be rejected. If the purely ethical side of the arrangement lodged a feeble protest in Herriard's mind, the material advantage with which it was weighted drove the monitor out of hearing. Success deferred is to the impatience of youth more galling, perhaps, than the settled disappointment of failure to a maturer mind. From Herriard success, the immediate success which a fairly clever and ambitious man expects to be his, had been withheld to a degree that had begun to gall him. Other men of his standing, no cleverer but more pushing, or more lucky, than he, were forging ahead. We are never so conscious of our slow progress as when we see ourselves left behind by others who started with us. Here, ready to Herriard's hand, was a means of catching up and passing his rivals, indeed of astonishing his world. It seemed rather like making a compact with the devil, he would tell himself with a laugh; yet where, he argued, was the wrong? He was going to rob no one; it was merely a partnership that he was entering into, and the success of a partnership is gauged by its strongest rather than its weakest member. Why should a bed-ridden man of genius be debarred from the active exercise of his mental powers? Where was the dishonour in being his spokesman, any more than his amanuensis?

So the argument went all one way; the strange partnership began, and was not long in justifying its existence. Men who frequented the fruitful and thorny paths of the law began to speak of Geoffrey Herriard as one of the cleverest of rising counsel; some, speculating in "futures" out of the capital of their reputation for foresight, pointed at him as the coming man. He went far to justify them by the lucky capture of a seat at a bye-election, the victory being in some measure due to a series of particularly smart and telling speeches, which tore into shreds the platform of his opponent, a flabby soap-maker with a long purse and a short vocabulary. Herriard's maiden speech was a success. "Best I 've heard since poor Paul Gastineau," Sir Henry Hartfield commented.

"Rather reminds me of him," his companion remarked. "Something of the same fiery periods and tendency to antithesis. It just shows how easily a man's place can be filled, even the cleverest."

The resemblance in style was indeed remarkable both at the Bar, on the platform, and in the House, for in the early day of his pupildom Herriard had to keep tight and assiduous hold on his master's hand. The work was hard, but the tutor was clever in imparting his knack, and, with a reputation increasing to a flattering degree, the incentive to industry on the pupil's part was great.

Every night Herriard paid a visit to the secluded house in Mayfair, sometimes to stay far into the early hours of the morning, rehearsing a speech, analyzing the probable trends of a cross-examination, making notes from Gastineau's quick observation of weak points or strong ones, spotting flaws, devising traps, in fact looking to every rivet in his own armour, speculating on every possible loose joint in his adversaries' for the morrow's tilt.

So the singular conjunction of rare master and apt pupil had continued in almost unbroken success for more than three years. Herriard had gained such a degree of confidence in playing his part as now almost to wear his instructor's talent at second-hand. He promised to become a rich man, and Gastineau, with ample means of his own for his circumscribed luxury, was pleased that it should be so. In return for wealth and reputation he expected Herriard to mark down, to follow up and worry certain old-time rivals of his own. His pupil sometimes marvelled at the malignant viciousness of his "riding orders." It was as though Gastineau had given him a rhetorical bottle of vitriol to fling over the smug face of some self-satisfied prig of an Under Secretary. Still he felt in honour bound to fling the corrosive denunciations with the most stinging effect, very much to the distortion of the Superior Being's cultivated blandness. Then Gastineau was wont to declare himself well satisfied; and perfect friendship, founded on mutual service, existed between the two men.

But strange events, little dreamt of by either, were on their way to meet them; events which were to turn into disastrous twistings the paths that had run so easily side by side.

CHAPTER III

A SOCIETY SENSATION

HAVE you heard the latest sensation, Lady Rotherfield? "

"Oh, no, Mr. Greetland. Do tell me. It's not the scandal about Lord Barnoldby and Infanta Turnour? Of course every one knows all about that."

"Hardly all, dear lady," Greetland simpered. He was one of the cohort of smart diners-out; the social bagmen who all travel in the same commodity, for which there is universal demand—scandal. "The Barnoldby-Turnour affair is never-ending. Nobody ever will hear the last of that."

" The Infanta is old enough to know better," observed Mrs. Hargrave on the other side of him, scandalized but interested.

"She is big enough at any rate," Greetland smirked.

"To be ashamed of herself," supplemented Lady Rotherfield illogically.

"Perhaps she has out-grown the sense of shame," suggested Greetland, whose stature matched his ambition. "But that was n't what I was referring to. Something much more thrilling."

"Mr. Greetland! "

The society purveyor glanced round to see whether he had an audience worthy of the news. People on each side seemed to be pricking up their ears. There was evidently something of interest going forward; the spasmodic tea-table talk languished; Dormer Greetland was always interesting; even men who itched to kick him admitted that. "A curiously marked caterpillar" had once been Gastineau's correction when some one spoke of Greetland as a worm. He was too sleek and foppish to be a human exemplar of the more coarse and naked invertebrate.

A pretty piece of scandal was evidently forthcoming, and he got an audience to his liking—almost every one of importance in the room, with one notable exception, the hostess, Countess Alexia von Rohnburg, who was listening to a prosy Russian diplomat.

"What is it? You have some news for us, Greetland?" cried the high-pitched voice of Baron de Daun, as he came across the floor and stood over the group. In his way the Baron was as great a scandal-monger and *blagueur* as the other man, but he tore reputations to shreds with greater violence than his English *confrère*, who was, after all, more of an artist. On the other hand, the Baron had greater justification in peeping through the chinks in society's shutters, for was he not a diplomatist?"

"A very extraordinary thing has come to light," Greetland said, with an air befitting the communication. "It is really quite dramatic, and Heaven only knows what will be the end of it."

"What? What?" Baron de Daun's temper was impatient of preliminaries, a circumstance which, however, was not so great a drawback as it would seem in his profession, where due weight is given to considerations other than individual fitness.

"You remember," Greetland proceeded, still deliberately—on his own ground it took more than the representative of a second-rate power to flurry him—"you remember the affair of poor Beauty Martindale? "

"Oh, yes; the poor fellow who died so tragically at the ball at—where was it? Yes? "

To Lady Rotherfield details were unimportant; but to Greetland they had their value. "Vaux House," he supplied.

"Yes? yes? "

"Let 's see. He was supposed to have died of heart disease, but it was doubted——"

"There was no doubt about it," de Daun asserted quickly. The subject was too interesting for more diplomatic contradiction.

"Of course," corroborated Sir Perrott Aspall, who had been in Australia at the time and was consequently well qualified to give an authoritative dictum. "He was murdered, done to death by one of his partners, eh? That 's the idea."

"I recollect," put in Mrs. Hargrave breathlessly. "Half the smart women in town were suspected."

"Many of whom were not at the dance," de Daun laughed.

"It 's years ago," Lady Rotherfield said, as an excuse for general vagueness.

"Well, what of it? What has come to light? " the Baron demanded. "Get on, my dear fellow, if you have anything to tell us."

Greetland, master of the situation, was content to wait till the chatter stopped. "The facts were these. Reggie Martindale, the handsomest man in town, was found dead at the Lancashires' dance. You are quite right, dear lady, it was at first supposed and given out that it was heart disease. Then, almost by accident, and after the certificate had been given, a tiny wound, scarcely bigger than a pin-prick, was found in his left side near the heart. That was hushed up; luckily the Lancashires' medico, who found it out, happened to be Martindale's as well, and so had the matter in his own hands; and naturally the Duchess did not want a scandal. It was said that Dr. Blaydon handed the Duke three-eights of an inch of broken steel which he had found imbedded in poor Beauty's heart, and received in return a cheque which established a record price for the metal. But old Blaydon knew himself to be a dying man at the time; an *exposé* could hardly hurt him, and he had a large family to provide for. As a matter of fact he died a few months afterwards, to the dear Duchess's great content. It 's extraordinary how fussy some good people can be over the idea of a scandal."

"You see," observed Mrs. Hargrave, "the Duchess does not require advertisement for herself or her dances."

"If it had been that terrible Oglander woman, now, she would have paid the doctor to call in the Coroner, and sent out invitations for the inquest, with reserved seats and champagne for the Press." Lady Rotherfield never missed an opportunity, even when she was in a hurry, of girding at her especial abomination among the many parvenues who beset her path.

"Well? well? " Baron de Daun's sharp voice split the air like the crack of a whip. "And now, after all, the affair has come out, eh? "

"Something more than that," Greetland returned, with all the superiority of the man who knows. "A good many people knew that much already. You see, after Blaydon's death, when she felt they were safe, the dear Duchess allowed herself to be a little indiscreet, of course only in her own set." His tone included himself by implication in the select band who shared the ducal secret. De Daun saw it was no use trying to hurry him, and worked off his impatience by pulling viciously at his moustache.

"What I am going to tell you," Greetland proceeded, "happened only a day or two ago. They were doing something to the little room where Beauty was found dead, just off the ball-room, putting up new cornices or something—not before they were wanted, they say the curtains at Vaux House were hung in Queen Anne's time; probably the poles date from the Conquest—well, in pulling the old window trappings about, the men found a long jewelled hair-pin, a tiny sword, the hilt set in diamonds and with the point broken off."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Sir Perrott.

"They found this in the cornice?" de Daun asked intently. It was important for him to get the story correctly.

"Somewhere stuck away in the curtains or behind the shutter; anyhow, hidden by the window."

"And who found it? A workman, eh?"

"One of the Duke's men."

"And what is to be the upshot?" Mrs. Hargrave's turn of mind was practical and anticipatory.

"Well, the whole thing will come out," Greetland asserted.

"No? Be made public?" Lady Rotherfield was dead against the publicity of to-day. A scandal to which the mob had access lost all its piquancy and was not worth discussing. The world was becoming less interesting every hour.

"To-morrow," Greetland confidently affirmed, "the man in the street will know as much of the affair as we do."

Lady Rotherfield gave a shrug of despair. The world where the man in the street is as well posted as the Duchess in the Square was scarcely worth living in.

"Then the Duke can't hush it up this time, eh?" de Daun demanded, showing his malicious teeth.

"No," Greetland purred on. "He is in an awful way about it, and the Duchess is having a bad time."

"Poor woman!" cried Mrs. Hargrave with cynical sympathy.

"Well, it is all her fault, so Lady Helen says," the Society Newsman went on, as suavely as though he were referring to no greater tragedy than a failure on the Matrimonial Exchange. "The dear Duchess would dismiss one of her carriage footmen because he was three-quarters of an inch shorter than his fellow. Lady Helen's maid tells her that the man wore cork wedges in his boots till he could hardly keep his balance, and was quite willing to meet her views and obliging, but the other day he had to go out unexpectedly, and in his hurry forgot the corks; the Duchess's eagle eye caught the disparity, her artistic sense was outraged, and the poor Duke had to give the man notice. She said that so long as Nature continued occasionally to turn out human beings six feet two inches in height she would not put up with a trumped-up, inferior article, only six feet one, of which a quarter only was genuine flesh and blood and the rest cork, and who looked as though liable to fall on his nose. Men of her standard height were to be had, and she meant to have them, all through alike; the cork-tipped variety she would leave to Bishop's wives, dowager Countesses, and other latitudinarians."

"So like the dear Duchess," Lady Rotherfield laughed. "Poor Duke, what could he say? "

"There was only one thing he could say to the man. Well, the fellow resented his dismissal, which was rather absurd of him."

"He ought to have been thankful to get rid of the corks," was Sir Perrott's opinion.

"Instead of which he appears to have declared that the proper thing for the Duchess to have done was to have sacked his tall colleague and replaced him by a man to match himself, minus the corks. This was flat treason in the face of the fact that the standard height of the Lancashires' carriage footmen was settled for all time in the second year of the reign of William and Mary. When the *lèse-majesté* was repeated to the Duchess she became livid. The sacredness of the Lancashire traditions to be scoffed at by a cork-mounted flunkey! Should the ducal glory be belittled by a creature whose only claim for notice rested upon a pair of false heels? The consequence was that the wretched man was told to go on the spot, and that happened just after the discovery of the compromising hair-pin."

"Oh, I see," said Sir Perrott.

"The man thought he would get what he could out of the ducal *ménage*, and went straight off with his secret to Hepplethwaite. Hepplethwaite gave him twenty pounds for it, and resold it within the hour to the Duke for a hundred and an invitation for his wife to the next reception at Vaux House."

"I must remember not to go," Lady Rotherfield murmured. "That odious pushing woman tries to work her way everywhere."

"It would have been a grand *coup* for the Hepplethwaite group of papers," Greetland said; "and would have set up their circulation phenomenally, but Hepplethwaite wants something more than money now. The Brailsfords of the *Daily Comet* somehow succeeded in dining at Montford House last week. Montford wants advertisement for that ass of a son of his, Darsingham, who is by way of taking up the New Hibernian question in the House to keep him out of mischief; and so the Hepplethwaites were bound to go one better."

"They say," observed Mrs. Hargrave, "that Hepplethwaite and Brailsford were office boys together in a tea warehouse."

"And," put in Sir Perrott, "they are now running it neck and neck for a Peerage."

"Shocking! " Lady Rotherfield groaned.

"Then the Vaux House affair is not to be public property at all? " de Daun asked. So long as he could add it to his *dossier* the stock of public knowledge might just as well be the poorer by that pungent scandal.

"Won't it come out, though? " Greetland returned. "I have n't finished my story. The footman on finding that the news did not appear in the Hepplethwaite rags took it to Brailsford, got fifteen pounds for it this time; and it is going to burst upon a jaded reading public to-morrow morning. They were to have had it today, only special-sized type had to be cast, and they were not ready."

"What is this thrilling announcement which is being prepared for us, Mr. Greetland? "

The tatler looked up with almost a start. The question had been put by Countess Alexia von Rohnburg, their young hostess, who had joined the group, unnoticed by Greetland or his listeners, intent as they were upon the new sensation. The Russian proser had come to a pause in that flow of shallow talk with which diplomatists are wont to disguise their thoughts and to cover the watchful observation of their fellows, and the Countess, who had caught above the suave murmur a word or two in de Daun's high-pitched voice that had arrested her, had risen and crossed the room. There was nothing in her handsome, animated face, the index of a susceptive mind, that showed more than an almost languid curiosity, as of one who lived in an atmosphere filled with tales concerning the great names of the day, and whose appetite was slightly blunted by the familiar fare. Nevertheless Greetland, the most studiously composed man of his world, looked up with an expression of greater embarrassment than he often permitted himself. And it was de Daun, not he, who answered the question.

"Mr. Greetland was telling us of the discovery of a hair ornament, a small jewelled dagger with the point broken off, in the room at Vaux House where Captain Martindale met his death two years ago."

"Ah! How thrilling!" If the speaker were really thrilled the mobile face must surely have indicated it more vividly. A wave of interest passed across it; the dark curves of the eyebrows rose and fell, that was all. Dormer Greetland, watching the face intently for a man in whose social balance-sheet manners stood as a notable asset, saw no more.

"Is it quite true, Mr. Greetland?" The tone implied an amount of incredulity which compelled a spirited justification.

"Absolutely, Countess. I was just saying that the discovery will be in the papers to-morrow."

His questioner smiled. "Does that make it true?"

"It will at least bring the story to its proof. The Duchess won't let it pass if it is a canard: she does n't need advertisement. But I happen to know it is quite true."

"I am sure Mr. Greetland would rather be dull than unauthentic, as the lesser of the two crimes." The sarcasm was none the less stinging from being shot through the sweetest of smiles.

"The Duke has been trying to hush it up," Lady Rotherfield put in.

Countess Alexia laughed. "All the details complete. And of course the owner of the sword has been found."

"I think not," said Greetland.

"Probably the Duke knows, as he was so anxious to hush up the affair," the Countess continued, in her fascinating banter. "Poor Duke, he had better be careful, or he will be arrested as what you call an accessory after the fact, which would be a sensation, if you like. Always supposing, that is, that poor Reggie Martindale did not die of heart disease."

"That has been clearly proved, Countess," Greetland said, glad of one firm foothold in stemming the increasing flow of increduilty.

Alexia gave a shrug. "I never heard it, and I 'm afraid I hear most things."

"The Duke hushed that up," explained Sir Perrott.

"How clever of him! With that talent for hushing tiresome tongues what a perfect nursemaid he might have been if he had n't been born a Duke and a man. How lucky he has failed this time, or we should not be having the sensation of the jewelled dagger, the false lover and the fair assassin. What hard lines! What a warning to inconstant young men and fussy Dukes. And we are to see it all in print to-morrow?"

"Get the *Daily Comet* for choice, Countess," de Daun grinned.

"I will, indeed. I am so sorry for the poor Duke."

"And the lady, the owner of the tell-tale weapon?" Greetland suggested.

"Ah, yes. But it is so long ago. Our sympathy by this time is probably superfluous. Our tragedies to-day are almost as short-lived as our comedies."

"And almost as amusing."

"Much more, to the spectators. Having left the art of pure comedy behind us with the days of patches and powder and red heels, we have taken a lesson from our stage managers and learnt to turn a tiresome tragedy into a roaring farce. It is easy enough. Play with a light touch, and exaggerate the sentiment, that's the way to get your laughs and your audience; the world must be amused at any cost. Oh, Prosper"; she broke off, and called to her brother, Count Prosper von Rohnburg, who had just come in with a scientific-looking man, "have you heard anything of the wonderful tale Mr. Greetland has been telling us, how they have found at Vaux House the weapon with which that poor Captain Martindale is supposed to have been killed? Isn't it thrilling?"

"No," he answered, speaking with a foreign accent far more pronounced than his sister's. "I am behind the world to-day. There was no time to go to the Clubs, we have been absurdly busy at the Embassy. Here, Alix, let me present to you Doctor Hallamar who has come to spend a little time in England."

Doctor Hallamar bent his leonine head with its mass of obstreperous hair low till his lips touched the Countess's hand. Manifestly he was a man of power, the keen, resolute face was of the kind that makes one glad to think its indicative strength has taken up arms against our common enemy, disease.

"You are taking a holiday in England, Doctor," Alexia enquired.

"Hardly." The deep tones sounded in unison with the rest of the man's heroic fibre. "My visit is professional primarily, but I hope to see something of England during my enforced stay; if not of its scenery, at least of its scientific side."

"Doctor Hallamar means the hospitals," the Count laughed. "He would rather see an interesting operation than the finest view in the world. You know the Doctor is the only man in Europe who can cure a certain form of disease."

Hallamar smiled deprecatingly. "Let us say, treat it, Count. I fear I cannot often undertake to cure it."

"Oh, you are modest, Doctor," Alexia laughed. "And you have come over to attend a special case?"

Hallamar bowed assent. "A lady who has lost the use of her limbs through an accident. As a diplomatist's sister, Countess, you will not expect me to say more." He beamed inscrutably through his spectacles. "My mission may be a failure, and then the less we shall have said about it the better."

"I can't imagine you a failure, Doctor," Alexia said, and truly, as her eyes rested with admiration on the strong, resourceful face.

Hallamar's smile had a touch of regret now.

"I would, Countess, that your gracious words did not carry with them to me the sting of unintended satire."

"What is all this about the discovery at Vaux House?" Count Prosper asked.

"Oh, we are to have the whole account to-morrow in the papers," his sister replied. "We can scarcely trouble Mr. Greetland to go over the story again."

The Mayfair newsman seemed not disinclined to repeat the recitation to a, perhaps, more appreciative listener; but the Count, accustomed to take his sister's slightest hint, abandoned any further show of curiosity. But he said presently, "We were at that ball at Vaux House, were n't we, Alix? Yes; I recollect poor Martindale. Good-looking fellow he was."

"You remember the sensation his death caused," Sir Perrott said. "Half the smart women in town, married and single, were supposed to be hit by it."

Doctor Hallamar's smile had faded. He was not interested and he showed it.

Baron de Daun and Dormer Greetland rose to go at the same time. Greetland's adieux were the more lengthy; he had so many social loose ends to tie up. It seemed when he reached the hall that de Daun must have been waiting for him. They went out together.

"Serious thing this about Vaux House," the Baron remarked, in quite a concerned voice. "I say, Greetland, between ourselves, was the Countess," he gave a jerk of the head in the direction of the house they had just left, "one of the women talked of with Martindale?"

"I fancy she was," the other answered, looking straight in front of him.

Tatler as he was, he knew de Daun, and did not care to be pumped to serve the thirst of that blatant young diplomat.

"It seemed rather curious, to say the least of it," his companion persisted, "her affecting to doubt the truth of the story. I wonder if the sword hair-pin was hers."

He looked round at Greetland with the quick turn of a bird of prey.

"Oh, that 's going too far," Greetland cried, throwing up his hand half way in protest, then full length to hail a passing hansom.

CHAPTER IV

THE DUCAL POINT OF VIEW

THE *Daily Comet* came out next day with its threatened sensational blazon: the world of London and beyond greedily assimilated the startling tale, and their Graces the Duke and Duchess of Lancashire began to have an exceedingly unpleasant time of it. The Duke especially; since he had the Duchess, as well as the Press and the rest of the world, to encounter. He had done nothing wrong (with the exception of that bribe to the late Dr. Blaydon) or even foolish, he told himself, for his little arrangement with the doctor had been highly expedient; yet the affair had, by the merest chance, taken this unfortunate turn, and he suddenly found his ducal neck and wrists in a moral pillory, with a shower of rotten eggs unpleasantly imminent. Under the circumstances he judged it wise to confine his perambulations within the precincts of Vaux House; happily its grounds were extensive, and for the first time in his life as he dispiritedly paced them, he omitted to regret the waste they represented of colossally remunerative building sites. He simply dared not show his face in the streets—not even the streets that he owned—and as to going into one of his clubs, including the House of Lords, why, he would as soon have walked into the crater of Vesuvius. So he promenaded up and down and around the somewhat dingy gardens of which the sombre and blighted tone was in complete harmony with his feelings. He could hear passers-by talking on the other side of the high wall which secluded his august pleasure-ground from the vulgar world, and wondered if, nay, made sure, they were discussing him and his methods in a spirit of galling irreverence, if they took their tone from that of the more enterprising journals he had read. Yes; it was an uncomfortable position for any one, let alone an old-established Duke; he became sure certain people were watching him from such upper windows as commanded a view of the grounds, since the wall of even an exclusive Duke is subject to certain architectural limitations; and he went indoors. On his way he saw people looking curiously through the great iron gates at the house of mystery and crime. He fancied he heard a murmur as he crossed their sight, but that was probably a symptom of hypertrophied egoism. In his perturbation of mind he flung himself into a room which he had intended to avoid, and found himself alone with the Duchess.

There was something in her eye which forbade retreat.

"Well? " The monosyllable was a challenge: more, it was the first flick of a castigation.

The Duke merely gave a shrug which was the most non-committal answer that occurred to him.

"What is the latest? " the Duchess demanded, in a tone which was not to be trifled with.

"I have heard nothing, dear. I have not been out."

"I just saw you come in."

"From the garden."

"Why don't you go out? "

The Duke made a stand. "I don't care to, while this wretched business is in big letters at every corner."

"What is that to us? You should be above taking notice of these halfpenny rags. If you are afraid of walking on the pavements, have a brougham and drive down to the Carlton. You ought to hear what people are saying."

"I am," returned the Duke, with infinite sense, "the last person in town to hear what people are really saying."

"You can go and tell them what you think about the whole disgusting business," said the Duchess.

"I 'm hanged if I do," the Duke returned. "If they have any sense they can guess that."

"Pray what do you expect then I am going to do?" the Duchess demanded.

The Duke intimated by a shrug that he had formed no definite anticipations as to his consort's line of conduct.

"If you were not a fool," she said, "you would know that people have n't any sense. They just accept any ideas that may be given them."

"Well, I 'm not going to run about town giving people ideas," the Duke declared sullenly.

"You know best how far you are justified in coming to that decision," the Duchess returned, with a world of meaning behind the mere inoffensive words. "Then you mean to let these abominable papers have it all their own way?"

"I don't care."

"But you ought to care." Her Grace's temper was rising. "You have no business to be a Duke. You are a disgrace to your order. You 'll get a wigging, my dear boy, when the King hears of it. Don't expect me to come to the rescue, that's all. If you don't face it out, I shall have to leave town in the height of the season, and I won't leave town, so there!"

"Leave town, Isabel? What in the name of common sense have we done that we should run away?" The Duke was getting exasperated.

"We?" screamed the Duchess. "What have you done? To take trouble and spend money in hushing a thing up, and then to allow it to come out, at a particularly awkward time, too, is the method of an imbecile."

Like most stupid persons the Duke was sensitive on the subject of *nous*, and the Duchess knew it.

"Imbecile?" he echoed huskily. "I was clever enough for you to marry."

"You were clever enough to marry me, if you like," she returned, with a puff of scorn.

"Clever!" he repeated in turn, in as withering a voice as he could command. "The general opinion at the time, pretty freely expressed, was that I was a fool."

"General opinion!" she returned with infinite contempt. "The opinion of a lot of women who were mad to be duchesses. What is your general opinion worth to-day in this tiresome affair? As worthless and wrong as usual. No, John, you did a good thing for yourself when you married me, and you know it."

"I know it?"

"I have made you."

This was too much. Here was the once Miss Isabel Grendon, a nobody with a pretty face and trim figure to whom he had, after much hesitation, played Cophetua, talking of having made a Duke of eight generations. "Made me!" he cried thickly, in his ducal indignation.

"I had an idea that the Dukes of Lancashire were made, as you call it, some hundreds of years before your name appeared on the roll."

"Made? Yes, I dare say; after a fashion. But you were not worth noticing, even when you had got your coronets on. Before I took you in hand you were nobodies."

"Nobodies!" the Duke could only echo. In this rarified atmosphere of insult independent argument, and even utterance, were asphyxiated.

"Nobodies," the Duchess maintained with exasperating insistence. "I 've seen your mother waiting in Johnson and Maxtons to be served and none of the shop people would notice her. They knew well enough who she was, and that she had come in to spend half an hour in buying a few yards of sevenpence-halfpenny lace to furbish up an old gown which her own housekeeper would n't have looked at except to sell to the dustman to dress his wife in for Hampstead Heath. *J'ai changé tout cela.*"

"Yes, you have," assented the Duke, recovering his breath as his wife lost hers. "And if extravagance makes a man, you have made me."

"One owes something to one's position," argued the lady.

"You owe a great deal, my dear, not to say everything," retorted the Duke, in a happy flash.

"To be Duchess of Lancashire meant next to nothing before my day," her Grace proceeded, ignoring the hit. "I saw the possibilities of the position."

"No doubt," agreed the Duke.

"And have raised it to its proper level in accordance with modern ideas. I found you thrown away in a dusthole, I have polished you up and brought you into the drawing-room."

"Have you indeed? Very obliging of you," was all the Duke could say.

"You think," went on the Duchess, having got again out of the tanglewood into a straight run, "you think that a Duke can go about like an old-clothes man, and his Duchess like a laundress, and be respected. That shows what a fool you are, John. You imagine in your stupidity that people in our position can defy appearances and do just as we like. So we can; but the world very soon takes care to show us that if we like to drop out it won't detain us. To-day the world thinks exactly as much of us as we show it we think of ourselves. It was all very well while the Feudal System lingered, and there was no moneyed mob to challenge us. In these days of shallow pretension and surface estimation a Duke in a bad hat is thought less of than a bookmaker in a good one; a dowdy Duchess cannot hold her own against a smart milliner. The world to-day does not bother itself to think who you are, and what your ancestors have been and done, in short what that bad hat really covers; it wants you to show unmistakably that you spend your money—or other peoples'—and add to the general amusement. Everything is theatrical nowadays, all glitter and show, and the crowd does not ask itself what the gorgeous scenery looks like from the back. It is as though people preferred a highly coloured landscape in the theatre, just canvas, distemper and limelight, to the real thing on one of our estates. Yes, John, you are a fool not to see what I 've done for you and your House."

The Duke accepted the long lecture, not because it convinced him or uprooted his belief in the infallibility of his family ways, but because he was given no chance of interrupting it. When it had come to an end, he said, not unnaturally, "I don't quite see what all this has to do with the present business. What are we going to do?"

"I have told you," insisted the Duchess. "Go down to the clubs and face it out."

"I 'm damned if I do," said the Duke, exasperated to find his patience had gained him nothing.

"If you are going to be vulgar——" began the Duchess.

"I 'm not going down to the clubs," he maintained.

"You 've got to go, John, and the sooner the better."

"I tell you I won't!"

"You prefer to skulk here?"

"If it had n't been for your unreasonable folly about that wretched footman——" he began.

"I 'm not going to be seen with footmen that don't match for you or anybody. You 'll be expecting me next to wear odd gloves or shoes or stockings."

The Duke was relieved from trying for a reply to this unanswerable argument by a knock at the door.

"Mr. Playford is in the blue drawing-room, your Grace."

The Duke glanced rather helplessly at his wife.

"Show Mr. Playford here," she said to the man, with decision. "Now we shall hear something of what is being said in the world outside, which you have n't the pluck to face. Aubrey Playford knows everything."

Next moment the omniscient one was shaking hands with them, and wondering curiously what sort of a *tête-á-tête* he had interrupted. As the Duchess was so smiling and the Duke so obviously relieved, he concluded that he had broken up a row.

"Is n't it too disgustingly provoking, this fuss about that tiresome affair!" the Duchess said, as soon as they had settled down. "These wretched cheap papers."

"Oh, they must have a sensation," Playford answered, politely sympathetic. "One comfort is that nobody believes half they read in them."

No one could be better aware than Aubrey Playford of the falseness of that statement. No one knew better than he, a keen observer of his kind, that people are only too greedy to take in everything, without discount, that can be said or printed to their neighbour's obloquy, or disadvantage, and more particularly when that neighbour happens to hold a high position. Under some conditions Playford would have been spiteful enough to say so, and indulge in a half-hour of moral vivisection; but that was not his cue nor his purpose to-day.

"It is altogether most provoking," the Duchess declared. "What are they saying about it, Aubrey? I don't mean the wretched papers, but at the clubs?"

Playford gave a shrug. "What do they ever say at the clubs beyond what some one tells them to say?" he replied, with a cynical contempt that, coming to him so easily, seemed a characteristic. "I have n't heard much. Piersfield was full of it, as he would be, but more in the way of collecting than distributing, and, of course, little Roddy Arden was making the most of a new sensation. By the way, it was pretty well known yesterday among what I call the professionals, Dormer Greetland and his school, and they naturally made the most of their twenty-four hours' start with the news."

The Duke groaned. "All through a wretched footman. It is terrible to think how mean an instrument it takes to set the world agog and to bring us into unpleasant notoriety."

"Oh, it is nothing," said his visitor in a tone between sympathy and indifference. "I certainly should not worry about it if I were you. It won't be even a nine days' wonder. The Rullington case comes on next Monday; there will be some pretty disclosures for the mob in that, and I hear that Lady Rullington has her trunks ready packed, and is prepared to skip."

The Duchess raised her eyebrows. "As bad as that? It is a pity that a presumably sensible woman as Maud Rullington was at one time should have such a vague idea as to where to draw the line."

The Duke breathed heavily through his set teeth. "These liftings of the curtain for the benefit of the mob are very damaging and regrettable."

"They are," Playford agreed. "And the man in the street is getting every day more eager for a peep."

"The man in the street," said the Duke, the phrase bringing to his mind an unpleasant reminiscence, "has been waiting outside my gates all day for a peep. I don't know what we are coming to when our very privacy is invaded."

"It is a sign of these times of undesirable publicity," Playford answered, almost with a yawn. He had not come there to listen to his Grace's platitudinous complaints, and was awaiting his opportunity for something else. As for the Lancashires, why, who can bring himself to sympathize with a Duke and Duchess in their social embarrassments? Are they not considered to stand too high on their pedestals for the sympathy of the crowd below to reach them, and to deserve any little exposure which their exalted position invites? At any rate, they were just now but the king and queen of Aubrey Playford's chessboard.

"I don't think you need fear any pointing of scandal's finger at you," he observed, with a confidence-imparting smile. "The question which will be agitating everybody's mind, when once they have arrived at the real bearings of the business, will be, who was the lady? "

"Ah, yes," exclaimed the Duke, somewhat relieved.

"But, Aubrey," the Duchess protested, "we are as much in the dark there as anybody else."

Playford's dark eyes looked hungrily shrewd. "You have no idea, Duchess? " he asked, with a touch of incredulity.

"Not the remotest," she replied.

"I wish we had," chimed in the Duke, and then fell to wondering vaguely exactly what he would do with the information if he had it.

The Duchess had her eyes fixed on her visitor's shrewd face. "You know, Aubrey? " she demanded, with a look of conviction.

Playford's astute smile broadened as he shook his head. "Not I, Duchess. But I might perhaps give a guess for what it is worth."

"Let 's have it," cried the Duke, all attention.

Playford looked inscrutable. "It is dangerous work guessing," he returned, "unless one has something to go upon. I was only suggesting it that the hounds of scandal may prefer to follow that fox to this if there should be a cross-scent."

"Quite so," the Duke agreed, none the less confidently that the idea had never occurred to him.

The Duchess was reflecting. "We have not much to go upon," she said slowly. "It was so long ago."

"You have," suggested Playford, "the ornament, the diamond hair-pin, was it not, that the man found?"

"Ah, yes." She turned to him with alert scrutiny.

"That won't be claimed," said the Duke, with a short laugh.

"Claimed! How stupid you are, John!" Her impatient exclamation scarcely took her eyes from Playford's face.

"It will probably be claimed by Scotland Yard," remarked that gentleman with easy premonition. "I am surprised they have not been here yet. I see, though, they say they have no knowledge of the affair. So like them. Perhaps they expected to be sent for. May I see the thing before it goes?"

"The ornament?" The Duke glanced at his wife in some hesitation. She had taken the tiresome thing and locked it up, being in no mood to pander to an already more than objectionable curiosity. He waited to see how she would refuse, but she rose, and saying, "I will get it," left the room.

"The Duchess is not going to show it to everybody," said the Duke, with a, possibly manneristic, touch of patronage.

"No, I should n't," Playford commented, with a shrewd smile. He thought he knew why he was made the exception, and was not going to take is as a favour.

His manner, with men at least, Dukes included, was rather more brusque than his present host liked, so no word further was spoken till the Duchess returned.

"Here it is," she said, and unwrapped the tissue paper from the unhappy piece of evidence. There it was. A miniature sword, the blade tarnished gold, the hilt set with diamonds, and the point broken off.

Playford watched its uncovering eagerly. As it was disclosed he put out his hand to take it, and, as he did so, glanced up in the Duchess's face. He did not mean to tell her anything, yet she saw in his eyes something that said a good deal. Next moment he had turned away to the light and was scrutinizing the little sword closely, eagerly, as a man will who wants to carry in his mind the exact image of an object he may not see again.

The Duke and Duchess stood behind him in expectant silence. But they both looked rather blank when he at length turned to them and affected to be studying a stain of rust on the blade.

"That looks as though it might have been blood," he said, tapping it with his finger nail.

"Hah: do you think so?" returned the Duke in a non-committal tone.

"Should n't be surprised," Playford replied in an abominably disappointing way. "But I 'm not an analyst."

"Do you recognize the sword, Aubrey?" asked the Duchess, with manifestly restrained impatience.

Playford looked at her with a fine assumption of surprise. "No. Why? Ought I to?" he asked. "Do you know the owner?"

"I thought you did," she returned pointedly.

He handed it back with a laugh. "Not I. It is not an uncommon device. I fancy even Scotland Yard will have some trouble in following up that clue. Thanks for letting me see it, Duchess. I 'm afraid I have rather a taste for the morbid."

She was evidently not going to get anything out of him that would pay for the trouble of fetching the *corpus delicti*, and so her Grace wrapped it up again in no very amiable mood. Her visitor's reticence was the more exasperating in that her instinct told her he could, if he chose, give a shrewd guess at the owner. Except as a matter of feminine curiosity she did not care much to know what she was convinced Playford might have told her; but she did not consider it consistent with her dignity to be thus made use of, and she felt very much inclined to be rude to her departing guest. And it is given to Duchesses to be very rude when they like. Then a certain idea of the inexpediency of venting her spleen occurred to her just in time; perhaps she realized that Aubrey Playford was a dangerous man for even a Duchess to snub, and she let him go in peace.

But the Duke, who dared not go out, remained to her; and he went to bed that night feeling that the world may be made very unpleasant, even for a Duke.

CHAPTER V

THE MAN WHO GUESSED

COUNTESS ALEXIA of Rohnburg had had a few of her intimate friends to luncheon at the house in Green Street, and the last of them, Mary Riverdale, was still sitting with her in cosy chat when a note was brought in. That her hostess did not like the look of the handwriting on the envelope, Miss Riverdale was sure. But she forbore the comment to which her intimacy might have entitled her, and contented herself with running through a picture book while Alexia read the note.

"Is—any one waiting? " the Countess had asked.

"No, madame," answered the man, unsatisfyingly laconic, as became his position.

Alexia read the note, restored it to its envelope and put it, address downwards, on the table. Her visitor threw aside the *Graphic*, and for a few moments there was a constrained silence, a pause of mental self-consciousness, almost awkward, considering how intimate the two were. But both of them, young though they might be, were too experienced players in that everyday game of social diplomacy to let an embarrassment become manifest. Yet there will assert itself, in spite of tact and artifice, a certain instinct which tells us our companions are reading our thoughts and gauging our dilemmas.

"I wonder what the next development of the Vaux

House mystery will be," Miss Riverdale observed, quoting the headline of the *Daily Comet.*

The affair had, as was natural, been the subject of animated discussion at luncheon, and it seemed scarcely worth while to reopen it.

The Countess gave a shrug. "We must wait and see," she answered mechanically. "The poor Duchess! One almost feels one ought to leave cards of enquiry."

"The poor Duke," laughed her friend. "They will get more fun out of him than ever. Not but what this is a serious matter."

"You really think so? " The talk was being sustained by an effort on both sides, and Alexia's question sounded suspiciously like covering a yawn.

"Don't you? " the other returned, in languid surprise.

"Oh, yes, I suppose so. If it is all true."

"Of course if it is n't true we shall have a disclaimer from the Lancashires to-morrow."

"I mean the connection between the broken ornament, the little sword, or whatever it is, and poor Captain Martindale's death. You knew him, Mary? "

"Only by sight. You did, dear, did n't you? "

"Casually. Meeting him about. As a matter of fact I was to have danced with him at the very time he was found dead."

"Alix! You never told me that. How awful! "

"It might have been," the Countess responded composedly. "But I did not see him. It was late; a good many people had gone. He did not come for his dance; then there was a fuss: we were told, at least I was, that Captain Martindale had had a fit, and people went off.

I fancy most of the men knew the real state of the case."

Miss Riverdale gave a little shudder. "Horrible! At a dance, too."

"Yes. It was upsetting, even to us who did not know the truth. As we were going, a doctor bustled in, shivering in a great-coat buttoned up to hide the fact that he was only half dressed. I have often thought that great-coat in the ball-room brought home the idea of a tragedy more vividly than the sight of the dead man could have done. Ugh! Don't let 's talk about it any more, or I shall get the blues."

Her visitor rose. "You look, my dear Alix, as though you had them already. Come across the Park with me. I am going that way home; we are pretty sure to meet some one to enliven us."

Alexia shook her head. "I was out all the morning and am rather tired. I feel too dull even to ask you to stay."

Miss Riverdale scarcely needed a hint to see that she had suddenly become *de trop.* She wondered whether her hostess's sudden preoccupation was not due to the letter just received; but to wonder was all that was permitted her.

Scarcely had the door closed upon her visitor when Alexia took up the note and read it through again, and this time there was no need for her to hide her disquietude. The words were few.

"Dear Countess,—

"I have something of great importance to say to you; if you read the papers you will doubtless guess to what I refer. Will you, in your own interest, be good enough to remove for once the embargo you have laid on my visits, and be at home when I call at four this afternoon?

"Yours sincerely,
"AUBREY PLAYFORD."

She read it through twice, and as she did so, she seemed to be struggling to evade the grip of a strong will that lurked beneath the words. Then, mechanically, she put the note back into its envelope and turned to glance at the clock. It was nearly four. She hesitated for a few moments, as taking counsel with herself; then rang the bell.

"I am at home to Mr. Playford when he calls this afternoon," she told the man, giving the order with a plain-spoken authority which disarmed all suspicion of an impropriety.

She had not long to wait before the expected visitor was announced.

Playford came in deferentially confident and inscrutable, and as Alexia rose to receive him her eyes met his boldly in a look of challenge.

"Bring tea," she said casually to the man as he left the room. She was not going to indue this unwelcome visit with any mysterious importance.

"It was good of you, Countess, to grant my request," Playford said, as he sat down, and let his eyes rest with covetous admiration on the beautiful woman before him. "I hope it has not been inconvenient; but the matter on which it was necessary to see you was urgent."

"Not at all," she answered coolly. "I have had some people to luncheon, and they have only just gone. What did you want to tell me?"

"I gave you a hint, Countess, in my note."

"Please explain it."

"You did not understand it?" The tone was incredulous; coupled with the sly look, almost offensively so.

"Not in the least," Alexia returned simply, so directly as to blunt the point of the insinuation.

But Playford was not the man to show a repulse. "It is about this business at Vaux House," he said, with quiet incisiveness.

"Oh? What of that? How does it concern me?"

If she was playing a part, her skill called forth his grudging admiration; grudging because he knew from her tone that, except under duress, she was not for him.

"You know, Countess," he replied, speaking now with forced directness; "you have seen that the little jewelled sword, a hair ornament, with which Reggie Martindale was killed, has been found?"

"Yes," she responded casually; "I saw that in the paper."

He told himself, as he watched her, that she had gone a shade paler; that was all; and he could not be quite certain of that.

"Do you believe it?" she added, as he paused, so to speak, on the strike.

"It is true enough," he said, in a tone that took the question out of the region of the debatable. "Reggie Martindale was done to death that night; why—only one person, probably, on this earth knows; but that he did not die a natural death has all along been almost an open secret."

"Has it?" she observed simply, yet with the slightest touch of contradiction. "Yes; well, I have heard as much. Mr. Dormer Greetland was telling us a long story about it a day or two ago. Still, I don't see how it concerns me."

She was better entrenched against his attack, he was forced to admit, than he had thought to find her; still, the defence should not serve.

"I 'm afraid it does concern you, Countess, very nearly," he replied, in a tone dark with impending mischief.

"Tell me how, Mr. Playford."

He gave a slight bow, as accepting the challenge. "I have seen this little weapon, the tiny sword; a dangerous ornament, Countess."

"Yes?" There seemed little more than a half-amused curiosity in her tone.

"The Duchess showed it to me, and—I recognized it."

Alexia laughed. "Ah, now I know. I think I have guessed this mysterious piece of news. I suppose you are going to say that you have recognized this formidable ornament as belonging to me."

Manifestly he did not like the words being taken out of his mouth, but he could only respond, with a slight bow of assent, "You have guessed it, Countess."

She laughed again. "My dear Mr. Playford, what an absurd idea!" Any one would have thought from her manner and his that she had him discomfited; but Aubrey Playford was not the man to be so easily beaten off.

"Hardly absurd, Countess." That was all he could say, for the door opened and tea was brought in.

"Is the poor Duke very much upset?" Alexia enquired, giving the necessary turn to the conversation while the men were in the room.

Playford gave an appropriately humorous answer as to the ducal state of mind, all the while eyeing the girl searchingly, and in spite of himself, inclined to wonder whether, after all, he might not have made a mistake.

When they were alone once more, their talk did not for the moment revert to its former and more dangerous channel. Perhaps both were glad of an armistice after the first trial of strength, of a short breathing space now that the methods of attack and defence were declared. Alexia poured out the two cups of tea, and did not raise her eyes from the table until Playford had taken his cup. Then she leaned back in her chair and faced him boldly as ever.

"You come here to tell me that?"

His eyes were on her, alert as a fencer's. "Could I do otherwise?"

"Surely," she returned, with something like contempt. "Even if it were true."

"I don't think I have made a mistake, Countess." He spoke slowly with a staccato enunciation of the words.

"You have, Mr. Playford." The cool incisiveness of her tone stung him.

"How?" he asked, with an ugly look of fight in his malicious eyes.

She was ready with her answer. "To begin with, in coming here at all; to a house, I mean, where you might know you would not be welcome."

"Obviously," he retorted with a smile, "as the bearer of unwelcome news."

"Which, if true, would be no news."

The hit was palpable, but he gave no sign that he felt it. "I came to warn you," he said, still watching her darkly.

"It was very kind of you," she returned, with a touch of contemptuous irony, "and quite unnecessary."

Manifestly the time for fencing was past. Playford rose, ostensibly to put down his cup, but he remained standing over her. "Countess," he began, in a tone that had a deeper vibration in it, "Alexia——"

She raised her head imperiously. "Mr. Playford, I have forbidden you to address me in that manner."

"I know," he assented. "And you have forbidden me your house."

She gave a little scornful nod of agreement.

"For no adequate reason," he protested. "My presumption, as no doubt you would call it——"

"Persecution," she corrected.

"Not persecution," he argued. "That is a hard word to use towards a man whose love overmasters him and makes him unduly importunate."

"A man," she replied, and from her tone she might have been discussing the point merely from an academical point of view, "a man who cannot control his feelings, but allows them to get the better of him to the annoyance of others, deserves to be kept at a distance, even as you have been."

The last touch perceptibly stung him. There was an unpleasant gleam in his eye as he returned, "But I am determined my state of banishment from you shall last no longer."

Her dark eyes were raised in half-amused scorn. "Indeed? I think that rests with me rather than with you, Mr. Playford."

"It did," he retorted viciously; "but it does no longer." He bent over her. "Alexia——"

She motioned him away, and rose. "No," she said, for the first time showing anger; "I will not allow you to call me that."

"I think you will," he returned. "Let us understand one another."

"If you think there is any misapprehension," she said, now cold again; "there is none on my part."

"I think there is," he rejoined significantly.

"No," she maintained scornfully. "I can reckon you up, Mr. Playford. I am sorry you should have thought proper to come here to threaten me."

"Have I?" he broke in protestingly. "Have I threatened you?"

"If not," she answered, "I confess I do not see the drift of what you have said."

"In my own justification, let me tell you," he urged. "Please."

Alexia resumed her seat with a significant glance at the clock. "I hope it will not take you very long."

How he hated her, this scornful, imperious beauty, who was meeting his attack so skilfully; hated her for her contempt and rejection of him, yet loved her with a fierceness and pervasiveness which he was, with all his self-control, unable to subdue; while he hated and cursed the bands of the passion that encompassed him.

"I certainly did not come here to threaten you, Countess," he began, in a tone schooled almost to apology. "I should hardly have brought myself to repay your graciousness in receiving me by an action so ill as that. I have simply come here, led, driven by an impulse which you forbid me to name, to make a proposition to you, or, if you prefer the word, a bargain with you."

Lying back in her low chair, her eyes fixed almost dreamily upon the little gold pencil-case which she lazily pushed in and out, she just lifted them for an instant to Playford's face, then lowered them again. But from the light of that instant's glance he saw no encouragement.

"It is easy," he went on, for the pause had been but momentary, and Alexia showed no desire to interrupt him, "it is easy to moralize and to propound codes of so-called honour, but when a man is possessed by a love as desperate, as all-absorbing as mine, he is scarcely to be blamed if, while human nature remains as it is, he seizes any advantage which fate may give him."

"Advantage? " she repeated thoughtfully. "You say Fate has given you an advantage—over me? "

There was an infinity of suggestion, of latent disdain, in the question.

"Don't let us put it that way, Countess," he protested.

"The word was yours, not mine," she returned.

"True. But the application was yours. Let us look the situation squarely in the face," he proceeded, anxious now to come to the point, lest the interview should be interrupted before he had declared himself. "Don't you think that, as you and I are, presumably, the only people in the world who know your secret, we—we might share more than that? "

He paused for her answer, but none came. Her attitude suggested that she was waiting for him to go on to the end, if it were not already reached.

"Countess!"

Thus called upon, she looked up.

"With regard to your proposal," she said, in quite a matter-of-fact tone, "it has the disadvantage of being based upon false premises.'

"How?"

"You talk of my secret—dangerous secret, I think you called it. I have no secret, dangerous or harmless, that can be shared by you—or anything else."

He took a step nearer and lowered his tone as he replied, "This is absurd, Countess. You will not put me off so. The little weapon with which Martindale was killed belonged to you."

"Indeed?" She gave a laugh. "I do not admit that for an instant; but, supposing it did, what then?"

He had scarcely expected this unwavering defence, this absence of any sign of fear in her. He was bound now to fight without compunction.

"It would, naturally, coupled with other circumstances, raise a very ugly suspicion against you."

"What other circumstances?"

"Won't you render it unnecessary for me to mention them?"

"How?"

"By letting me be no longer out of favour with you," he pleaded.

"I prefer to hear the other circumstances." She was hatefully cold and contemptuous, he told himself; wishing almost that he had not come on this errand which promised him as little satisfaction as honour.

"You were in that little room with Martindale," he said, with an effort to save the situation. "You were seen to come out of it not long before his death was discovered."

"Seen? By whom?"

"By me, for one."

"Ah!" There was infinite significance in the exclamation.

"He was known to be an admirer of yours."

"Do I kill my admirers?" She rose. "You are giving me a terrible, a really mediæval character, Mr. Playford. I wonder you trusted yourself here alone. But perhaps you left word with the police before you ventured to knock at the door. Is there anything more you have to say to me? It is getting late."

She had beaten him at every point, turned every lunge he had thought to make with deadly effect. The sting of her sarcasm made him furious; as furious as a man of his self-contained temperament could ever show himself to be.

He could hardly prolong the interview now, after her unmistakable hint; and if he did, it must be with little hope of gaining his point. She meant fighting, if it were forced upon her, and, so far, her defence had been perfect.

"Then do I understand you to deny, Countess, that the little dagger is yours?" he asked bluntly, with an expression of rankling defeat on his face.

"I know nothing of it," she answered, with contemptuous indifference; "and if I did, I should scarcely be inclined, after your somewhat objectionable proposal, to discuss the matter with you."

As she made a move towards the bell, he put forth a restraining hand. "Then you reject me and my suggestion, Countess," he demanded sullenly. "It is your final answer?"

"My final answer," she assured him. "I am only sorry that you should have been so ill-advised as to invite it." And she rang the bell.

"Very well," he returned darkly. "Time will show which of us has been the more ill-advised."

She had turned her back upon him, and so, without any leave-taking, he went away.

CHAPTER VI

THE MAN BEHIND

"YOU are earlier than I expected, Geoffrey." Gastineau, as he spoke, laid down the book he was reading and stretched out his hand to Herriard with a smile. "Was the dinner worth going to—apart from business? "

"Oh, yes; it was n't bad." Herriard brought up a chair and sat down with a yawn.

"Tell me all about it."

"Not much to tell that would amuse you, I 'm afraid. The usual assemblage of self-seekers; I myself being no exception."

"Yes," Gastineau agreed, with a little cynical laugh that seemed characteristic of the man. "It is inevitable, as the world goes to-day. All tradesmen, advertising their wares, only in our plane of life they happen to be intellectual goods we want to dispose of. There is not much point in being clever, Geof, unless we bring samples of our brains into market and make the world think the bulk is equal in quality all through."

"In some, perhaps rare, cases it is," Herriard observed. "Yours, my dear friend, for instance."

Gastineau shook his head with a meaning smile. "You did n't know much of me in my living days. If they were not over I would not tell you what a humbug I was. Oh, yes," he replied to the other's gesture of protest; "I had a certain amount of brains, more than most people, if you like; and that is not saying much. But let me assure you, my dear Geof, that their principal employment when I was fighting the world, was in minimizing my defects and exaggerating my cleverness; in short, working with all my might to make the world take me for a wonderfully clever genius, and to ascribe to abnormal brain-power what was really due to carefully directed push and discriminating powers of showing off."

"It is difficult to believe," Herriard returned with mock gravity, "in face of the astounding modesty with which you tell it."

"Ah!" Gastineau sighed wearily, with a strong man's check on despair. "It is all over now. No more use in keeping on the mask: I can throw it off, and be comfortable. Well, go on about the dinner. The usual dozen and a half of snobs and fools, brave women and fair men, eh?"

"The majority certainly answered your description. Lord and Lady Greystoke were there; he looking something between a professional conjurer and an Italian waiter, she like a faded doll left too long in the toy-shop window and touched up for sale with a dab of vermilion on each cheek."

"Ah, yes. I remember her years ago. She always had that etiolated look."

"I wonder how Greystoke, with his taste for southern colouring, came to marry her. He talked Italy all dinner and was hovering about Sicily when I left."

"She had eight thousand a year," Gastineau explained, "the depth of the gold at her bankers compensated for the pale straw of her colouring. Whom did you take in?"

"Mrs. Roderick Capel, a doll of another description."

"Yes, of the mechanical and talking variety." Gastineau laughed. "At least, she chattered."

"About herself the whole time; with a perfect genius for making a long sermon from an unpromising text which must have stirred the admiration of the Dean of Stanborough who was her other neighbour."

"Ah, she has caught the disease egoitis in a virulent form from her husband who was once a commercial traveller," Gastineau commented. "He used to travel in millinery: he now travels in Roderick Capel, Esquire, M.P. etc., etc., and with the same push that gave him his first hundred pounds. I know the fellow; won a big case for him about ten years ago. He was so irrepressibly offensive that I nearly threw the brief at his head. The only man I felt I could never snub. Who else?"

"Let me see. Oh, the Tayntons."

"Don't know them."

"Negligible quantities, except so far as the commisariat is concerned. Lady Mary, a greedy monosyllabic nonentity, and he a ventriloquist's puppet, wooden, and as symmetrical as a wax-work with a movable lower jaw that looks as though it were worked by a string."

"How ready people are to waste their hospitality on titled lay figures," Gastineau observed contemptuously.

"Then," Herriard continued, "there was Briscoe, the new member for Wroxby, very pleased with himself; a wig-block of a Guardsman invited probably for table-dressing purposes; and a German doctor."

"Variety, at least." Gastineau lay back with a smile, watching Herriard with half-closed eyes. "What was the German doctor doing there?"

"Come over here for some big operation, I heard."

"Ah! What is his name?"

"I did not catch it."

"Ah!" Gastineau's eyes contracted curiously. "He did not interest you?"

"Not particularly. Although he was probably the most interesting person there. But he was not near me; I had, when the ladies went, to endure the banal egoism of my fellow M.P."

"The social tax levied by stupidity on intellect." Gastineau roused himself again. "Ah, my dear Geoffrey, we must not be impatient with fools and bores. If every one were clever and interesting we should be lost in the crowd. Now; the Rullington case. Is the day fixed?"

"It is only five down the list," Herriard answered, taking some memoranda from his pocket. "One case is a big one, but Dancer tells me there is a great possibility of its being settled. So Rullington may come on at any time."

"You found my notes for your speech clear, eh?"

"Quite, thank you. I ought to do something there. I only wish I could do justice to your ideas."

Gastineau seemed rather darkly preoccupied. "Oh, my dear fellow," he replied, almost mechanically, "you 'll do me and yourself justice enough if only you make up your mind to it. Confidence, confidence is the nine points of pleading."

"And the tenth?" Herriard laughed.

"Is composed of equal parts of law and luck. You ought to make a big hit here, Geof. It 's a fighting case, if ever there was one; the sort of case where, even with losing it a foregone conclusion, a man who can seize the chance is sure to send up his reputation."

"I 'm afraid of Lady Rullington."

"Never mind her, as long as you are not afraid of yourself."

"She may break down under Maxwell's cross-examination."

"Maxwell's line of comity will naturally be to bully her into damaging admissions; so much the better for you. A better man for our purpose could not lead against you. You can have the chivalrous stop out all along, and make capital out of his treatment of your witness. Do everything to get the sympathy, at least of the public, with you, and fight, fight, fight; then, whatever the result, you, Geoffrey Herriard, will score heavily."

"Thanks to you."

"Oh, you know I am only too grateful to find a means of utilizing what must otherwise now be a buried talent. By the way, talking of *causes célèbres,* what is the latest about the Vaux House affair."

"I have heard of no further development."

"Of course every one is talking about it? "

"It is a perfect conversational windfall."

"I hope, for your sake, my dear boy, the Rullington case will not come on till the Lancashire has talked itself out."

Herriard laughed. "It promises to do so, unless it gets a second wind from some sensational development."

Gastineau shook his head. "I don't see much chance of that."

"No," Herriard agreed. "Only the finding of the owner of the discovered weapon."

"Have you heard any rumour of that?" the question came sharply.

"Oh, nothing tangible," Herriard answered. "Of course, everybody thinks it necessary and smart to have a theory."

"And names are mentioned?"

"Oh, yes. Half the smart women in town are pointed at, many of whom were not even at the ball."

Gastineau laughed confidently. "Then there is safety in numbers—for the real culprit. Our old friend, no doubt, the *spretæ injuria formæ* for motive. Well, let us hope two things, one that for the lady's sake it won't come out further, and, secondly, if it does, that Geoffrey Herriard will be retained for the defence."

"It would be the trial of the century."

"Quite. Thanks for coming in. Look here, by-the-bye," Gastineau reached to the table that stood by him, and took up some pages of manuscript. "I have got out a peroration for your speech in Rullington, supposing it comes to that stage. I got my mind full of the case, and I can't help making speeches as I lie here. I think it is rather taking, if I may say so."

"You need not say so, at any rate," Herriard laughed. "It would not be your speech if it was n't effective."

"Ah, well, it is just the sort of thing that used to go down with them. There 's your part." He tossed the papers towards Herriard. "Take it and learn it. And now, good-night. By the way," he added, with a half yawn as Herriard pressed his hand and turned to go, "you can't recollect the name of the German medico you met to-night?"

"I 'm afraid I don't," the other answered. "Why?"

"Oh, nothing. A sick man's trivial curiosity, a failing I never had time for when I lived in the busy world. Good-night. *A demain.*"

As the door closed upon Herriard, a strange look of suspicion had come over Gastineau's face.

CHAPTER VII

THE FIERY ORDEAL

BEFORE many days had passed Countess Alexia had reason to know that the enemy she had made and defied was at work against her. Her instinctive judgment of her unwelcome admirer's character had surely prepared her for this. And in truth Aubrey Playford was one of those men whose chivalry is but skin-deep: it is merely the veneer of their education and breeding, the mask which covers a malignant and unscrupulous soul. The man could be trusted to act according to the recognized codes of honour and propriety so long as his own interest and feelings were not deeply touched; when passion, developing into a spirit of vindictiveness, clashed with the code, the mask shrivelled away and the real man showed his face.

But in this matter he had worked quietly, unostentatiously, knowing well how small a spark of scandal it takes to kindle a great fire. It had been enough for him to drop a few well-placed hints, of course under a strict and purposely futile enjoinment to secrecy, and the mischief was done. The whispers spread, growing in tone and freedom, till at last Countess Alexia von Rohnburg began to be openly pointed at in serious connection with the Vaux House tragedy. From personal to journalistic accusation was but a step and that an inevitable one. The allusions to a young lady of great beauty, a well-known and popular figure in society, closely connected with the diplomatic world, were markedly obvious, and the question was discussed, under a thinly veiled indication of identity, whether, being protected by the law governing foreign embassies, she would be amenable to justice were the crime brought home to her.

So, it seemed, in a few hours, Countess Alexia was rudely made aware of the fact that she was a marked woman. All kinds of wild tales began to be circulated as to the motive for the deed; there was a strong touch of romance about it that caught the popular fancy; the affair was lifted by its surroundings from the normal sordid groove of crime; yet the fact, the terrible fact, remained that this girl was pointed at as a murderess.

Merely on suspicion, it is true, but suspicion, the very vaguest, left to roam unchecked, gathers size and weight till it assumes the proportions of certainty.

When the odious innuendo first came to Count Prosper's notice he went to his sister in a terrible state of mind. He was, for a diplomatist, a frank, straightforward young fellow, devoted to his profession, and jealous of his family honour. Alexia assured him that the suspicion was, if not quite groundless, absolutely untrue.

"Then we must give it the lie at once," he cried, with the vehemence of his native blood.

"Would it not be wiser to treat it with contempt?" she argued. "There is nothing tangible yet to answer, and there is the unfortunate fact to face that I was in the room with Captain Martindale, and I did lose, there or somewhere else, my sword hair-pin."

He stared at her blankly for some seconds before he could reply. There was a terrible suspicion in his mind.

"Alix," he exclaimed hoarsely, "you—you did n't kill him?"

She laughed. "No, my dear Prosper," she answered, meeting his look frankly; "I give you my word of honour I am as innocent of that as yourself. Although the man did behave somewhat objectionably."

Count Prosper gave a great sigh of relief. "Thank Heaven!" he exclaimed. "I thought for a moment it might have been true."

"My dear brother," she protested, "I admit your right to ask the question, but really you might credit me with a less drastic but hardly less effective method of giving aggressive admirers their quietus. Poor Captain Martindale! He was very confident in his powers of fascination, but his vanity scarcely deserved that punishment."

Her brother had become calmer to face the situation. "Then do you know anything about the mystery?" he demanded. "Can you throw any light upon what happened? It never occurred to me to ask you that before, Alix; but if you know the real culprit, it is no time to keep silence now that this fearful odium rests on you. You will tell me?"

She shook her head. "I know nothing. I left Captain Martindale in that little room alive and well; objectionably so, I fear I thought him. And that was the last I saw of him."

"He, Martindale, made love to you?" Prosper asked, after a troubled pause.

Alexia gave a shrug. "He made love to every woman worth making love to. Yes, he included me in his score. Unfortunately I was obliged by an act of friendship to give him the opportunity."

"Ah, yes? "

"You know Hilda Dainton? He was inclined to behave very badly to her. Some men cannot bear to think that there is any happiness left in store for their cast-off loves. Hilda had made a fool of herself, and repented—too soon, I fancy, and Captain Martindale, when he found his power over her slipping away, tried to make use of another hold over her; some stupid letters."

Prosper nodded. "I see, Alix. You could help her when she could not help herself."

"I considered anything fair with such a man," Alexia replied simply. "One must fight unscrupulous deceivers with their own weapons. The man made love to me and there was my opportunity. At the price of a kiss I got Hilda's letters back for her, and in return presented Captain Martindale with my opinion of his conduct. That was all."

"I wish it were all, Alix," her brother said gravely. "At present it looks as though we were at the beginning of an ugly scandal; none the less ugly that it is untrue."

"I am sorry, Prosper," Alexia replied. "But what can I do? I cannot marry a man I detest even to avoid the most hideous of scandals."

Her brother started. "What do you mean? "

"Simply," she answered with a shrug, "that we owe this to Mr. Aubrey Playford."

"That fellow? Ah, yes; you forbade him the house."

"It was necessary," Alexia said coldly. "When people forget themselves, they can scarcely complain if the rest of the world shows a disposition to consign them to oblivion. But he came here the other day and confirmed my opinion of him by giving me my choice between this scandal and himself."

Prosper began to pace the room impatiently. "It is unfortunate, Alix," he remarked somewhat querulously, "that you seem fated to fascinate the wrong men."

"It carries a sufficient punishment with it, my dear Prosper," she returned. "You need not add your reproaches."

The veering of scandal's vane had afforded considerable relief to the Duke and Duchess of Lancashire. His Grace found that he could walk the streets once more and enter his clubs without the inconvenience of feeling himself a marked man; and the Duchess, resuming her social activities, rejoiced in discussing the affair almost from an outsider's standpoint.

Dormer Greetland was disposed to be very jocular on the subject.

"The poor Duke," he said, "is going about like a convict on ticket-of-leave. He has been serving his time with the Duchess, and a very uncomfortable time it has evidently been. They say she has taken the unique opportunity of wigging the poor man for every act of his somewhat monotonous career. According to her he has never done anything right in all his life, except marrying her, and even there she has never forgiven him for not being a more interesting bridegroom. The wretched Duke, who can't help his personality, was brought up to rely upon his strawberry leaves, and in the faith of the gospel that a Duke need not bother about intellect or even appearance. For the last ten years he has been enduring the process of having all that nonsense shaken out of him, and the Duchess can put plenty of vim into her shaking. Yes;

this affair has afforded an excellent opportunity for summing up the evidence against him, and he has been found guilty on every count of the indictment. He has had a pretty bad time of it. He could only plead his dukedom, but he could hardly expect that to go down with his partner in it, who was at once judge and prosecuting counsel. They say things got so bad that he had to lock himself up in his own rooms and subsist on a stray tin of biscuits, a miscellaneous assortment of tabloids, and a syphon of soda-water flavoured with bay rum. The regimen has had such a lowering effect on his constitution that he is more ducal than ever. He is so fine-drawn, what with his troubles matrimonial and commissariat, that Percy Nayland as he saw him go into the Carlton said he looked like the ghost of the Feudal System in a frock-coat."

"And in the meantime, what is going to be done about the business?" some one asked.

"So far as I can make out," the quidnunc answered, "it is going to be left to develop."

"Is Scotland Yard going to take it up?"

"I don't see how they can."

"Not against Countess Alexia von Rohnburg?"

"My dear Monty," Greetland returned, "as things stand, they can't do it. They have nothing to go upon. You must remember, what the public never will understand, that moral proof does not necessarily constitute legal evidence. Granted that this ornamental stiletto, which has been found, belonged to the Countess, also that she and Reggie Martindale were together alone in the room not long before the tragedy was discovered, it establishes a *primâ facie* case against her, but, so far, nothing more."

"Circumstantial evidence, surely? "

"Yes, but with an important link missing from the chain. You see a good deal might have occurred between the moment of the Countess Alexia's leaving the room and the finding of what happened. No, my dear friends, it looks very like what we all think it, but there is an important section of the affair still covered in mystery."

Greetland had made it his business to work up the subject; it was his vocation to be glib and authoritative on every likely topic of the day.

"The Countess's position is not exactly enviable," a man suggested.

"It is utterly and entirely odious," Greetland agreed. "One scarcely likes to believe the thing of her; she is such a charming girl. Yes; one is horribly sorry for her. Without forgetting the dictum *de mortois*, one may hazard the opinion that poor Reggie probably brought the thing on himself and got no more than he deserved."

"H'm! " There was a general pursing of lips as of men who felt constrained to keep silence when it was in their minds to say much. Restraint, however, was not a virtue which either character or inclination encouraged Greetland to practise. "There was that affair of Annabel Fancourt," he remarked, in a low tone, as of those who discuss the dead in their coffined presence.

"Behaved badly there, eh? " a man suggested, feeling his way carefully along the fascinating path of scandal which leads directly away from the above-mentioned dictum.

Greetland shook his head with a suggestion of unutterable condemnation.

"Ah; always understood so," the other man proceeded, gaining boldness since no one seemed inclined to protest. After all, it is often quite as piquant to discuss the sins of the dead as of the living, and actually does less harm—to them.

"Rather a bad lot," another ventured.

"Always might be calculated on to go crooked with women," the fourth gossip supplemented.

"They always spoilt him. Injudicious blandishment has sent many a good man wrong."

"Women," said Monty Vaxton who cultivated a reputation as a social philosopher, "women can't resist a gamble in love. That is why the professional Philander always has his hands, or rather his arms, full."

"At any rate they are optimists in the passion," Jack Bellairs remarked, "and they think they can succeed where other women have failed; quite forgetting that they are playing for an elusive stake, and where winning is, if possible, more disastrous than losing."

"So you think," said Hugh Lufton, who understood facts better than theories, turning to Greetland, "that Countess Alexia was under the influence of Martindale's fascinations?"

Greetland shrugged. "It looks like it; though no one even suspected it. But she is a clever girl."

"Scarcely, if that were the case," Vaxton objected.

"My dear Monty," said the drawing-room sage, "no woman is clever in love, although many are perfect geniuses in the matter of marriage. When we talk of a clever woman we eliminate love from the question."

"This is a strange aftermath of—I suppose—jealousy."

"Yes; one hardly sees at this stage what the girl can do."

"Awkward for Count Prosper," Lufton declared. "He is a very good fellow. For all practical purposes an Englishman." Which was the highest compliment the speaker felt he could pay the young diplomat; and certainly the sincerest.

"You remember," Lufton said to Bellairs, "that fellow Paul Gastineau, the K.C.? "

"Gastineau? Rather. Killed in a railway accident in Spain. I know what you are going to say. Yes. He was supposed to be a great admirer of Countess Alexia."

"Oh, yes," Greetland replied, with the superiority conferred by an acknowledged omniscience. "I don't fancy there was much in that, though. At any rate on the lady's side."

"Ah, no. He was a deuced clever fellow."

"Gastineau? I should think so. He had about the biggest practice at the Common Law Bar."

"Safe for the Woolsack if he had n't been cut off."

Lufton looked knowingly doubtful. "I don't know," he replied, with a contradictory head shake. "Paul Gastineau was not altogether a *persona grata*, clever as he admittedly was. There seemed always something about the fellow that put one on one's guard."

"Too clever, eh? "

"Yes. One of those men whom even their own party is afraid of. In politics safe mediocrities are preferred to dangerous geniuses. And men of the Gastineau type are looked upon with particular suspicion. They are apt by comparison to show up the short-comings of our pet aristocratic statesmen. No; I very much doubt whether that Spanish signalman's error really robbed England of a future Lord Chancellor."

"I dare say not," Vaxton agreed musingly. "I am inclined to think, though, that this man Herriard, who has made such a hit in the Rullington case, will go far. His style is like, very curiously like, Gastineau's, but without that touch of deviltry the other man often exhibited. Yes; a safer man, and a more British personality."

"Gastineau was more or less a foreigner, was n't he?"

"Half Italian. Charlie Wryton who devilled him told me he never quite felt at his ease with the fellow. You know Wryton? Big man who got his blue at Oxford, and the last man in the world, one would think, to funk; but I really believe he was afraid, personally afraid, of Gastineau, and distinctly relieved when he was killed."

"The power of mind over matter."

"Rather the influence of unscrupulousness on mere animal courage. Gastineau's mind and methods were deeper than Charlie could fathom. There is always a terror in the unknown."

"Countess Alexia does not seem to have been particularly happy in her lovers," Bellairs remarked.

"No," Greetland replied. "She is rather a mystery in that way. I mean, that she was not married long ago. Perhaps her unfortunate experiences may account for it. But unhappily, a woman like that is bound to attract the wrong sort of men as well as the right. Anyhow, she has been clever enough to hold them at bay. She could hardly have foreseen the Martindale development."

"Can any one, who knows anything of her, really believe she killed him? " Lufton asked incredulously.

Greetland did not care to scotch a profitable scandal. "Women are unaccountable creatures," he replied, with a shrug.

CHAPTER VIII

THE VAUX HOUSE CASE

THE Rullington case had come on, had dragged its ugly length through twenty sensational columns of print, and had ended with honours—or, rather, dishonours—easy. Incidentally, it sent Geoffrey Herriard several rungs up the ladder of success. His position now was enviable and seemed assured, thanks to the strong, acute brain which backed him. It was, perhaps, a cynical pleasure to Gastineau, lying helpless, to feel that, nevertheless, he was not entirely impotent, to strike vicious blows from behind his living mask; to make his personality still felt in a world to which it was dead. The lust for fighting still burned fiercely within him; he could indulge it, and grimly watch the effect of his tactics, his cunning lunges, his deft parries. Perhaps, too, there was a certain joy in holding a man's career and reputation in the hollow of his hand. Herriard was an apt pupil; still, he was, after all, but a pupil. The clear grasp of the case or of a situation, the piercing, unerring insight into the legal and political complications, above all, the gift of forecasting probable developments, all these were not to be acquired: they could only be communicated from master to pupil as occasion arose. Herriard, with Gastineau's guidance withdrawn, would have been left a man of fluency, of reputation, but with no administrative power behind them; one who would probably fail at a crisis, who at the parting of the ways would be as likely to take the wrong road as the right. Each man knew this, and each wondered at times whether the other knew it. Certainly Herriard never showed the slightest suggestion that he could get on without his mentor. On the contrary, now that his reputation at the Bar seemed established, he was just as assiduous as ever in paying his evening visits to the secluded house in Mayfair for instruction in the next day's procedure. And Gastineau, on his part, never seemed to weary of taking his friend at great pains through the minutest convolutions and ramifications of his work. It was like an old chess-player instructing a prentice hand in the analysis of openings, moves, and counter-moves, of attack and defence.

But one day a strange thing happened. At the rising of the Courts a knotty legal point which had been sprung upon Herriard by the opening counsel remained undecided. Herriard was going to speak in the House that night, and so, being rather nonplussed by the point of law, and not knowing when he might get away from the division, he jumped into a hansom and drove off to Mayfair with the intention of putting the point to Gastineau while the arguments were still fresh in his mind, and so being put up to a telling reply.

To his surprise, and for the first time during their acquaintance, Gastineau was denied to him. The bolt of the latch was shot, and his key would not turn it. He rang, and Gastineau's man, Hencher, who opened the door, said, with a manner of significant insistence, that his master could not see Mr. Herriard that afternoon.

Herriard stared. Such a reception was the last thing he would have looked for.

"Is anything the matter?" he enquired anxiously. "Mr. Murray is not ill, not worse?"

Yes; Hencher thought, his master was ill, at least he was in great pain. He could not bring himself to see any one just then; and hoped, if Mr. Herriard called, he would make allowances and forgive him.

There was no more to be said. The impulse of friendship and gratitude had at first prompted Herriard to go up and see whether he could be of any use or comfort in alleviating the stricken man's sufferings, but Hencher stood uncompromisingly in the aperture of the half-opened door, and made no suggestion of admitting him. So Herriard, with a sympathetic message for his friend, turned away, puzzled and a little hurt. Pain? It was curious. Since the accident which crippled him he had never heard Gastineau complain of pain. His state had been one of sheer helplessness and, so far as his lower limbs were concerned, of complete insensibility. Then, even if Gastineau were in pain, why had he refused to see the man who obviously was his only friend? He could not understand it. Had Gastineau's feelings changed towards him? He could think of no reason why that should be. The incident worried and depressed him more than he cared to own; anyhow, though, he would return that night when the House was up, and then doubtless would know the reason of that strange denial.

When at a late hour he drove up, the lock which he had half expected to find secured against him, yielded to his key, and Gastineau received him with all his usual suggestion of warmth, and with a laughing apology for what had happened in the afternoon. "But really, my dear Geof, I was not fit to receive a dog, let alone my best friend, my only friend. I can't forget that, you know," he added, with a fascinating touch of feeling; "and simply dreaded lest my pain might have driven me to an impatience, even with you, which might have cast a shadow between us."

Herriard could scarcely feel aggrieved after that. Nevertheless two circumstances brought an uncomfortable shadow of doubt to his mind. One was the unusual symptoms of pain, of which he had never heard Gastineau complain before; the other was that, instead of, as he expected, finding his friend ill and exhausted from the afternoon's attack, he seemed brighter and less helpless than usual. Still, Herriard told himself, he knew little of medical science, had no experience in the strange turns disease would take, and his doubts therefore might be groundless.

"Well, what news?" Gastineau asked.

"Rather good news," Herriard answered. "I have got a provisional retainer from Bowyers for a big case."

"What is that?" Gastineau enquired alertly.

"Nothing less than this Vaux House affair. I 'm in luck. That will be a sensational case, if you like."

"I should think so," Gastineau replied, a peculiar gleam in his eyes contradicting the almost languid interest in his manner. "What is the case? Is the Duke bringing an action?"

"The Duke? No. Countess Alexia of Rohnburg is suing the *Daily Comet* for libel."

"Ah! Yes; I anticipated that. The position has been forced upon her. The innuendoes were unmistakable. It is an ugly position for her, though."

"Particularly, if, as Bowyer assures me, she is absolutely innocent in the matter."

"So? He says that. And believes it?"

"Certainly, from his manner. The Countess is the victim, it appears, of a suspicion, coloured, unfortunately, by unlucky coincidences."

"H'm! She is bound to make an effort to put herself right, even by challenging the *Daily Comet* to a legal duel, poor woman," Gastineau commented thoughtfully, as he seeemd to weigh the Countess's chances in the professional balance. "You are, of course, briefed for her?"

"Yes; it is a fine opportunity for us—eh?"

"You could not wish for a better. You know the Countess?"

"I have met her and her brother, but don't know much of them. They seemed very much liked and quite popular—but, of course, Gastineau, you must have known them. They have been over here a good many years now."

The grey eyes from the couch shot a cross-examiner's glance at Herriard; then reassumed their former expression of quietly alert interest.

"Oh, yes," Gastineau answered, "I knew something of them in the old days in my earlier state of existence. It all seems so long ago, my former acquaintances are like the figures in a dream. Yes," he continued reminiscently; "I recollect the Countess, a handsome, fair girl with a beautiful voice, and more character in her than one usually associates with those of her complexion. And the brother? Yes; more like an Englishman than a foreigner, with a taste for sport, natural rather than acquired; a man whom one would trust to play the game. Well, let 's hope he 'll win it this time. We will do our best, eh, Geof?"

"I hope we shall," Herriard answered heartily, adding, "Your help will be very necessary here."

"Of course, my dear boy, you shall have the best I can give you. Although it strikes me you can almost run alone now."

"Not I," Herriard protested, wondering whether he detected a note of unwillingness in the other's speech. "Some cases, naturally, are plain sailing, and I have gained experience and profited immensely under your guidance; but here, I am sure, I should be utterly at sea without you. It will be a terribly delicate case to handle, and the slightest mistake in tactics may make all the difference."

"No doubt," Gastineau agreed. "Yet practically the *onus probandi* will be on the other side. If the Countess has nothing to fear from cross-examination, you ought not to have a very difficult task in getting a verdict. Always supposing, as I say, that she is keeping nothing back."

"Bowyer is positive. She has at any rate convinced him. And he is no fool."

"No, old John Bowyer can see farther into a client's mind than most of his sort. Well, we shall see. Only don't forget, my dear Geof, that a presumably innocent woman, with as fair and frank an appearance as this Countess Alexia, can be deeper than you and I and all the tribe of Bowyers put together. I am thinking," he added quickly, "of your reputation. It would be bad for it if you made a mistake now."

"Under your auspices I don't think I shall. It looks like being the case of the century. Fancy the Duke in the box under fire from Macvee."

"The other side have him? "

"So Bowyer thought. The Duke will have a bad quarter of an hour on the subject of the hushing up of the result of the post-mortem."

"Lucky for Blaydon that he is dead."

"Yes. He has escaped his Nemesis."

"It is the only way to escape our Nemesis," Gastineau returned meaningly.

CHAPTER IX

ALEXIA'S DENIAL

SUDDENLY it became known that the venue of the sensational Vaux House case was to be changed from a civil to a criminal court. The reasons for this were obvious. The one meant a summary trial, the other involved vexatious delays which, considering the very odious position in which Countess Alexia was placed by the scandal, were not to be endured. Then the alleged libel was, if unjustified, of a particularly cruel and damning character; and so it was not a question of damages but of punishment. Perhaps the writers who had been so quick to jump at conclusions, and, when seized upon, to elaborate doubtful facts into flamingly sensational "copy," began to share with the editors who accepted them, certain misgivings that they had asserted more than they could prove. They had been unfortunately precipitate; still they must make a stiff fight in justification, and at the worst there was always a grand advertisement to be sure of.

So it came to pass that the responsible editors of the *Daily Comet* and the *Mayfair Gazette* were cited to appear at the Police Court to answer charges of criminal libel at the instance of Countess Alexia von Rohnburg.

All the quidnuncs were there; all, that is, who could squeeze into the Court. And a society tattler, a professional diner-out, will take as much pains "to be there," and show himself as resourceful in expedients for getting a good view as will the most enterprising of journalists. And as the magisterial examination dragged on, the sensation hunters had a series of highly enjoyable field days.

The publication of the libels having been admitted and justification pleaded, Countess Alexia was called to give a direct denial to the charges insinuated against her. Then came what was expected to be the feature of the case, her cross-examination. The somewhat aggressive methods of that celebrated legal bully, Ambrose Macvee, K.C., failed to elicit any more damaging admission than that she had lost her hair ornament at the ball, and that to the best of her belief the one produced in Court with which it was practically certain Captain Martindale had been stabbed to death was that which had belonged to her. This looked ugly enough, especially when coupled with the admitted fact that she had been alone with Captain Martindale in the little room where he was subsequently found dead. Proof, it is true, was forthcoming that the Countess had left the room a considerable time before the tragedy was discovered: she had danced with more than one partner, and had betrayed no sign of confusion or excitement.

"What nerve the woman must have!" was the comment of those who were loth to let go the sustaining belief in her guilt to which they were clinging. It was quite thrilling, and gave a new fillip to the sensation. A Countess stabs her inconvenient lover to death in a secluded corner, then returns to the ball-room and resumes her waltzing as though nothing had happened. What a pity that it was, so far, no more than conjecture. However, merely in the way of suggestion, it furnished stimulating head-lines, somewhat carefully worded, it is true; the penalty of libel and contempt of court being very much in the air just then.

There was still, as there always had been, an important link wanting in the chain of evidence which could justify the charges against Countess Alexia, the mystery of that half hour during which the deceased man had been left alone in that room, for anything to the contrary that mortal eye had seen. Alexia swore that when she left him he was alive, she had had a disagreement with him on a rather painful subject, the reputation of a friend of hers, and had parted with him on bad terms, but she had never raised her hand against him. There had been no reason why she should have done so: when she quitted the room Captain Martindale was as much alive as any one in that Court.

Of course she would swear that, the quidnuncs declared, unless she wished to brand herself a murderess; she had come into Court to swear to her innocence; nothing less was to be expected. But it all looked very queer, very ugly: at any moment, it was thought, she might break down in her evidence, and the case be brought to a sudden and dramatic close.

But Alexia never faltered, and then the disappointed folk attributed this to her tremendous nerve-power. The woman who could kill one lover and then go and dance with another was not the sort of person to break down in the witness-box. It was not to be expected, even under Macvee's searching and tricky cross-examination; it simply emphasized her character, and consequently her guilt. So much for the fashionable Ghouls; the smart thirsters for blood.

But there was another party, smaller and less noisily insistent, who believed in Alexia; who looked upon her as a high-spirited woman shamefully maligned and accused, the victim as much of a terrible chain of coincidence as of a hateful lust for scandal.

In his defence of the Countess, Herriard had, as both he and Gastineau anticipated, a trying task. It required the greatest delicacy and tact during the somewhat drastic cross-examination of his client, to know just when to interfere and how far to protest. In this Gastineau's advice was golden; he seemed to have the faculty of anticipating everything that would happen; not merely the line the cross-examination would take, but even the very wording of the questions which the rough-tongued Macvee would ask. So Herriard's championship of his client was, at least on the human side of the case, successful to admiration, notwithstanding that sympathy was largely against him. The craving for scandal and for the downfall of a fair woman is a morbid growth which will eat away the innate sense of chivalry. Fair play is, paradoxically, often a sad spoil-sport: we do not always want the best man to win, and right is usually terribly uninteresting compared with wrong. So there is much satisfaction in seeing wrong established that the spectators may gloat over its punishment. Still, Geoffrey Herriard's advocacy, plucky yet tactful, was bound to extort approval even from those who were longing to see him trip; it had the unbounded praise of the Countess's sympathizers and, what he felt he valued still more, the ardent gratitude of Alexia herself. Alexia was, almost literally, fighting for her life; this hideous chance threatened her with, at least, social annihilation, and the very desperation of the fight accentuated her dependence on her defender. Those were terrible days to her, when she was a marked woman, the gazing-stock for every vulgar quidnunc; branded already by the prejudice of the sensation-mongers as, at least, a venial murderess. The words and messages of sympathy she constantly received scarcely sustained her through the ordeal.

The Duke of Lancashire also was having a very uncomfortable time of it. The suppression of the result of Dr. Blaydon's post-mortem examination was an awkward point for him to meet. He was closely questioned on the incident, and it is to be feared that the ducal conscience went to bed that night with the weight of a certain ugly sin called perjury upon it. For though his Grace was fain to admit that he had given the obsequious medico a substantial cheque to write a certificate of natural death so that the fuss of an inquest might be avoided, he yet stoutly denied all knowledge of the wound, the pin-prick which had just reached that false heart, and stopped its mechanism. Denial here was safe, since the only other person who had absolute knowledge of the transaction, namely the doctor himself, had been summoned to another Bar where perjury is futile.

Still, although he stuck to his repudiation of the suggestion—since its admission would have had serious consequences, even for a Duke—his dignity was badly battered about during that searching hour. He rather attempted to take the line that he was too big a personage to be expected to trouble himself about such unpleasant trifles as the mysterious death of a guest under his roof: he was accustomed to leave all these dismal, disagreeable details to his people who would naturally understand better than he how to deal with them. This is the line for an aristocratic witness to take when he is to be the joy of the opposing counsel and the despair of his own. The work of cutting away the fringe of pomp and artificial grandeur, and holding up the poor man inside them as a wretched specimen of weak-minded humanity, is easy and paying.

The harried Duke, stripped for the hour, of his fine feathers, made to stand out in a dingy, uncompromising court, and show what manner of man he really was, cut a sorry figure. Counsel poked fun at his pomposity, his affectation of high and mighty indifference; there was much laughter in court, and the whole deplorable business was given verbatim (parentheses and all) in the papers.

The case, when it at last reached the committal stage, was left hanging in an evenly balanced position, and public opinion was divided, although not quite so evenly, as to the merits of the issue.

CHAPTER X

A SENSATIONAL APPEARANCE

ONE night, during the interval which fell between the magisterial proceedings and the trial proper, when the judgment of the law was yet suspended, while that of public opinion was clamorously divided, Herriard came hurrying to the house in Mayfair with a startling piece of news.

It was no less than the unexpected acquisition of evidence which seemed as though it must at a stroke establish Countess Alexia's innocence of the death of Captain Martindale.

"A man has suddenly appeared," Herriard related, "turned up to-day at Bowyer's office, who declares that at about 12.30 on the night in question he was walking down Verney Street, and as he passed under the wall of Vaux House he stopped at the west gates to listen to the music which, with the windows open, could be plainly heard. That, as he waited there, his attention was attracted by the sight of a man, evidently one of the guests, who came out upon a low balcony, and, having looked about as though to make sure he was not observed, climbed over the railing and jumped down into the garden. Campion says he then lost sight of the man for a few minutes, but as he stayed on there thinking little of the matter, the man suddenly reappeared, hurried past the gate and came out by the wall door, and then made off quickly towards Piccadilly.

Acting upon that evidence young Bowyer immediately set off with Campion to Vaux House. The fellow described exactly where he had stood and pointed out the window through which the man appeared. It was——"

"Of course," Gastineau interrupted, with his enigmatic smile, "the very window of the room in which Martindale was found dead."

"Exactly. What do you think of that, my dear friend?"

He was looking eagerly at Gastineau for evidence of his story's effect; but from the depths of those inscrutable eyes he could draw no certain conclusion. There had been the alert, piercing glitter fastened on him as he told the news, but, beyond a certain almost fierce interest and enquiry, nothing was betrayed.

"A grand piece of evidence," Gastineau now answered quietly. "Almost too good, too conclusive, to be true."

"The man is positive," Herriard urged.

Gastineau nodded, as accepting the statement for what it was worth.

"Why," he asked, "has he not come forward before?"

"He has been abroad, in South America," Herriard explained, "and returned only a few days ago. The possible connection of what he saw with Martindale's death occurred to him last night only, and he went round to Bowyer's the first thing this morning."

"Ah!" Gastineau's lips were curled in a cynically incredulous smile. "What is the position in life of this Mr. Campion?"

"Oh, he is a respectable fellow enough," Herriard answered, a little dampened and set back by the other's questioning attitude. "A clerk. I should say a man of the middle class, ready to turn his hand to anything decent."

Gastineau's smile broadened. "Including perjury?"

"My dear Gastineau," Herriard protested, "I don't think he is the man for that. I have just seen him at my chambers, and did my best to test his story. He seemed straightforward enough."

"Let 's hope so," Gastineau returned dryly. "So he went out to South America. To better his fortunes, presumably. Has he done so?"

"I don't fancy he has," Herriard was forced to admit.

"You did not question him on that subject?"

"No. We were too full of the more important one of his evidence."

Gastineau gave a little impatient head-shake. "My dear Geof, I sometimes think I shall never teach you to look at a case and a witness from the other side's point of view. Now, which do you suppose Macvee, or any counsel with a head on his shoulders, would go for in this case, the evidence or the man?"

"The man, no doubt, seeing that his evidence, as we take it, can scarcely be shaken. It does not, however, necessarily follow that poverty and perjury go together."

"There is a certain bond of union between them, though, especially in a case like this, where such evidence as this fellow proposes to give would, if unshaken, clear the reputation of a wealthy woman."

"He has asked for nothing."

"No," Gastineau rejoined cynically, "that will, in the order of things, come afterwards. He would at least have a strong claim on the lady's gratitude. No, my dear Geoffrey, we must walk warily in this new development, and not jump at the conclusion that our case is already won. I have seen too many of these dramatic surprises not to mistrust them."

Herriard laughed, a little uncomfortably. "You are inclined to be pessimistic, Gastineau."

"Pessimism is just experience's drag-chain on man's natural sanguineness," Gastineau returned with his knowing shrug. "An habitual optimist makes a fine explorer but a poor lawyer. Certainly the practice of our profession does not conduce to optimism. But here I am only counselling caution and warning you to look all round this new evidence."

"Old John Bowyer is long-headed enough; he has sifted it pretty finely, and relies upon it," Herriard urged, somewhat vexed at the douche of cold water which his friend seemed so unaccountably inclined to play upon the important discovery.

"John Bowyer is shrewd enough," Gastineau agreed, "but he is at his wits' end as to how he is going to win this case. I wonder, my dear boy, that you have not yet discovered how widely the two branches of the profession are apt to differ in their estimates of the value of any given piece of evidence. A solicitor somehow never seems to get outside the law, beyond the purely legal aspect of a question or a deposition: he seems to lack the counsel's faculty of forecasting the effect upon the judge, the jury, and, above all, on the other side."

"So you think," Herriard suggested, almost in disgust, "that we ought to set no value on this man's evidence? "

"I don't say that, Geof; but I can't help seeing several weak spots in it. Properly handled by the other side, and it is the kind of nut Macvee loves to crack, it might very easily break down and go for nothing."

"I should be sorry if it did miss fire," Herriard said gravely. "It would be a heavy blow for the Countess Alexia. She thinks her case is won now; and, of course, it means everything to her."

A peculiar light shot through Gastineau's eyes, the gleam in those of a lazy beast of prey roused by the sign of a prowling rival. "You have seen the Countess—already?" he enquired, with the suggestion of a sneer.

"Naturally. Young Bowyer and I went to Green Street as soon as we had satisfied ourselves about the depositions."

With Gastineau's smile the sneer was more apparent. "A personal interest in one's client," he remarked, "is charming, but hardly business-like. It is apt to warp the judgment, my dear Geoffrey. I fancy there is more than professional *kudos* at stake here. You want this new evidence to be conclusive and overwhelming, consequently you fancy it is all you desire. I fear that, for the first time in our partnership, my dry precepts and unprejudiced advice will be unheeded."

"I don't know why you should say that," Herriard protested, flushing slightly.

Gastineau laughed. "My dear fellow, if I could not see what is so fairly obvious, I should not be of much use as your guide, philosopher and friend. I don't blame you. Countess Alexia is, no doubt, a very handsome and fascinating woman, and even lawyers have hearts, although they don't often get credit for them."

Herriard laughed, perhaps to cover his discomposure. It is in the early stages of affairs of the heart that intrusiveness is strongly resented. "Your vision is keen enough, my dear Gastineau; so keen that it seems superfluous to eke it out with imagination."

"Is it imagination?" The question was put sharply, searchingly, and Herriard rather winced under it.

"I'm afraid it is," he answered. "Nevertheless it might not be a bad thing for me if there were to be some truth in it; don't you think so?"

The inscrutable light was in Gastineau's eyes; an expression which gave no clue as to the man's intentions or feelings. A very mask it was to the working of the busy brain.

"That is a question which I must confess my utter inability to answer off-hand," he replied, as the eyes half closed, veiling the enigmatical light within. "It might be a good thing; it might be a very bad thing."

"How do you mean?"

"The case, the lady's character, is *sub judice,*" Gastineau laughed. "You had better pause in any step you may be contemplating till the verdict has been given."

Herriard rose. "My dear Gastineau, I don't know whether you are joking, but surely you must know that Countess Alexia is absolutely innocent of this monstrous charge."

Gastineau, however, looked anything but convinced. He shook his head half-humourously albeit there was no humour in the sharp eyes. "Beware, my son, of allowing your judgment to be warped by personal considerations."

"Personal considerations?" Herriard burst out. "I hope I am not such a fool. But I would stake my reputation, my very existence, on the fact that the Countess had no more to do with Martindale's death than you or I."

"You would most likely be right; possibly be wrong," Gastineau returned, in the drily sententious tone he could assume when direct argument seemed inexpedient.

"Do you mean to say," Herriard demanded warmly, "that you really believe her guilty?"

"I mean to say," Gastineau rejoined, stretching out his hand with a smile, "that I am not going to quarrel with you about it; so good-night."

Herriard took his hand. "Gastineau," he said, almost imploringly, "do, for pity's sake, look at this affair with a more charitable eye."

"Of course I will, my dear fellow," the other responded, with an almost affectionate touch and tighter clasp of the hand. "Of course I will. Only you must remember, if I am to be of any service to you in this business, that the charitable is not necessarily the legal or the correct view of the possibilities of the case."

The manner in which he spoke was so winning that all Herriard's soreness left him. But he judged it wise to discuss the case no further that evening. When, after a few words more, he turned to go, Gastineau called him back.

"By the way, Geof, for we must not let my scepticism burke this evidence altogether, what sort of a man was this that Campion saw? He described him?"

"A dark, thin man."

"H'm! A trifle vague. Anything more?"

"Bowyers have the full description. Naturally—always supposing his evidence to be genuine—he would have noticed him particularly."

"No doubt," Gastineau agreed, with a recurring touch of scepticism. "He is sure he would recognize the man again?"

"Oh, absolutely confident. I heard him say so."

"Well, it is a comparatively narrow circle," Gastineau remarked, still with the incredulous smile. "The man must, in all probability, have been either a guest or a waiter."

"Campion says he looked like a gentleman."

"Ah! Then Bowyer had better get a list of the guests and set about identifying him. Good-night."

CHAPTER XI

HERRIARD AND ALEXIA

A LESS keen observer than Gastineau might have suspected that the position of Herriard and Countess Alexia was, at any rate on Herriard's side, rapidly exceeding that of counsel and client. And it was, particularly in a man of Herriard's temperament, scarcely to be wondered at. All through the trying stages of the case he had been brought into close and more than mere professional relations with the von Rohnburgs, while between him and the Count a friendship, founded on the secure foundation of reciprocal liking, had sprung up. Firmly and absolutely convinced as Herriard was of Alexia's innocence, so completely, indeed, that the slander roused him to a quite unlawyer-like state of indignation, it came as a shock to find Gastineau coolly arguing upon the supposition and accepting the fact that she was guilty. Certainly, he told himself, Gastineau does not know her, has but a vague recollection of her over some four or five years back; he takes her as a mere pawn upon the legal chess-board: he has a cynical disbelief in women; it is but to be expected that he should think the worst of her; I might have realized all this, and not been such a fool as to resent his suggestion.

Nevertheless, the bare idea that any one, even a dry, quibbling lawyer, could for a moment admit the possibility that this woman, whose soul shone clear and true from her eyes, whose every word carried a conviction of honesty, could have done a man to death in secret, and then have entrenched herself behind a rampart of skilfully-woven lies, was to him utterly inconceivable. True, the deed, had she really been guilty of it, would naturally have been committed under stress of great provocation. Captain Martindale's character and want of principle where women were concerned were well known: no one would have been surprised at his finding a reprisal at the hand of those whom, as a chartered Philander, he had loved and laughed at. Natural, too, it would have been, if having been driven to that fatal stroke, she should have fought against discovery by every means in her power. For, putting aside the consequences of the deed, it would have been a fight for her honour. No; it was not the probabilities of the case, considered generally, which weighed with Herriard, but his utter inability to believe this thing of this woman. And, as his feeling for her almost insensibly grew warmer, the more preposterous did the notion appear. So when Gastineau mooted it in his cold-blooded, cynical way, it came as a shock, as a suggestion which filled Herriard with abhorrence. His whole soul recoiled from the idea, as from a monstrous impossibility.

And this conviction was confirmed when, a night or two afterwards, he dined quietly with the Countess and her brother. All through her animated talk, happier now, in the good news that had come, he searched her face for a sign of guile, of a reservation of the truth, of an *arrière pensée:* looked till he was ashamed of himself for being led to doubt; and saw nothing but frankness and honesty. Clever she was, and possessed of wonderful self-command, but it was a cleverness unmixed with deceit, the reverse of wisdom, not falsehood.

Both Alexia and her brother were cheerful that night, happier than they had been since the charge was first levelled. There was a second guest, a countryman of the von Rohnburgs, Dr. Hallamar, the Austrian surgeon who had returned to England on a professional visit. It was a pleasant little party; the four being all completely in accord and sympathy. The doctor naturally felt strongly the way in which the Countess had been treated; he was a strong man, an acute thinker who suggested rather than expressed the depth of his opinions.

After dinner the two guests were left for a few moments alone.

"Mr. Herriard," the doctor said, with more warmth than he seemed given to show, "you are a lawyer; it is your professional duty not only to defend but to think the best of your client, to maintain her innocence against the world; but now, tell me, not as a lawyer, but as a man, I will not say an English gentleman, for there the code of honour guides and restricts you, but as a man of brains and worldly knowledge, you do not in your heart believe that it is possible for our hostess to be guilty of this dastardly charge? "

Herriard had little difficulty in responding to the somewhat extraordinary invitation. "I should be willing to stake my life on the Countess's absolute innocence," he declared resolutely.

"I was sure of it," the other observed.

"You, too, Doctor," Herriard continued eagerly. "you are a man who has doubtless seen much of human nature and its capabilities of deception, does your observation tell you that disingenuousness is possible here? "

Hallamar shook his head emphatically. "Not for one moment."

"I am glad to have your confirmation of my conviction," Herriard replied. "But I would maintain it against any man's opinion for all that," he added with a smile.

The doctor merely acknowledged his enthusiasm with a gesture as Count Prosper rejoined them.

When they went upstairs the Count and Hallamar became deep in a discussion in their own language, and Herriard found himself with Alexia.

"You have a downright champion, Countess, in the Professor," Herriard said.

"I was hoping," she returned, "that I no longer needed one."

"I hope and believe so too," he replied. Then added in a lower tone, "I shall be sorry though, to think that my office has come to an end."

For an instant her eyes rested on his face, then she looked away. "It may, happily, come to an end officially, since its work will have been accomplished, but it will never be forgotten."

The last words were spoken low, with just the suspicion of a tremor in them. It seemed to pass to Herriard, as he responded, "Ah, Countess, how you reward me! "

"Reward you? Can I ever do that? " she said.

"Indeed you can, far above my deserts," he answered, with the spell of her voice and presence, of her mood attuned, as it seemed, to his own, thrilling through him. "Although it is unnecessary; the fight in your cause has been its own reward."

There was a little pause, as though the subject had run as far as it might venture. Then Alexia spoke.

"Ah, if I dared believe that the worst was over now! "

"I think you may," he replied. "I do not see how this new evidence can be shaken."

"You are not absolutely certain? " Her eyes were fixed on his face, and he felt she was reading him.

He thought of Gastineau and his almost scoffing scepticism. He longed to feel able to tell her that all fear and doubt were passed, yet, with the memory of his mentor's views, he could not, and felt a brute in consequence.

"I believe it," he answered, hoping the evasion was not apparent. "My own opinion is that this man's evidence settles the question so far as you are concerned."

"But you think others may not share it? " she asked shrewdly.

"I think," he answered, "that others, who are interested, as half the world is, in believing the worst, may be reluctant to share it."

Alexia was leaning back, bitterly reflective. "The world, our world, is very cruel," she said.

"The world," he replied, "craves for amusement. Left to its own resources it is a dull world, and is constantly growing duller. So its amusements must ever be increasing in pungency. Strong contrasts and mental vivisection are its intellectual pastimes, the cant of a spurious broad-mindedness which affects hesitation in condemning vice, since there is none who can claim virtue, and at the same time prejudges the maligned for a like reason. Our modern Pharisees' boast is not that they are virtuous, but vicious, and they call Heaven to witness that they claim to be no better than the rest of mankind."

Alexia was looking at him searchingly with a touch of disappointment.

"You are a cynic," she said simply, yet with wistful conviction.

"Not I," he replied frankly, and at his prompt denial her face brightened.

He hated himself for so easily falling into the trick of Gastineau's pessimistic speech. "No: I am a believer in the honest, right-thinking minority, although my profession prevents me from shutting my eyes to the mental attitude of the rest. On the surface, at any rate, it is a cruel world, Countess, and I am more sorry than I can express, to know that you, of all women, have felt its hardness, its injustice. But please don't think me a cynic."

The smile she gave more than reassured him. "I won't," she murmured, "although I began to fear you were one."

His voice was low as hers as he rejoined, "I never shall be now that I have known you."

She laughed now. "If it were not too serious for a joke I should tell you to wait till our case is decided."

"Countess," he protested, "it has long been decided in my mind, unassailably decided."

"Ah," she said, "that was your duty. You could scarcely do less than believe in your client."

"I might," he rejoined, "have done much less."

"And what convinced you? " she asked.

"My client herself," he answered.

Then again, just as their hearts seemed to come near to one another, they drew away again. Perhaps to her the time appeared not ripe, while on his part, a chilling shadow seemed to intervene between him and his love; the figure of Gastineau, the brain, whose mouthpiece he was.

His relations with Gastineau formed, indeed, a consideration which had begun to exercise his mind very disagreeably, and which he felt must in honour make him pause before declaring his love for Alexia. She would take him as he took her, judging by fair outward appearance, by the affinity of their beings, by—in short—by that reciprocal personal attraction which produces love. On her side, doubtless, the foundation for regard, the regard which he hoped and believed was ripening into love, had been admiration. He had been in her service skilful, courageous, chivalrous; he seemed to have sprung to her side when sorely pressed, as her champion, almost heaven-sent, and, apart from the professional relation in the matter, her gratitude and admiration were unbounded. No doubt the personal element had much to do with this. Chance might have given for her defence a dry, crabbed old lawyer, a Macvee, dusty, aggressive and uncompromising, who would yet have served her well, at the same time regarding her merely as a client rather more interesting than usual. But Geoffrey Herriard was very different. He was comparatively a young man; he had, if not a handsome, at least an interesting clear-cut face; he was an attractive personality, a rising politician, an already risen member of the Bar. His career was assured, and his history carried with it that interest which successful cleverness can always claim. What wonder, then, that Alexia, almost a woman of the world, at least a *femme faite*, though she might be, should grow more and more attracted by her counsel who had quickly become her friend as well as her brother's?

And yet, as Herriard kept telling himself all through the days and nights, he was a lie; a living, pleading, arguing, ingratiating lie. His form, his voice were his own, and that was all. The brain he took credit for was another man's. The telling speeches, the masterly conduct of the case, the shrewd arguments, even the smart retorts by which he scored, were no more his than are Shakespeare's lines the actor's who utters them.

So he stood that day, a fraud, a living sham, a man who took credit for achievements which were not his, for work which he, unaided, could never have brought to a successful accomplishment. And the worst of his position was, as he now felt it, that the excuse he might make told against him, was, in fact, the crux of his situation. For its avowal, the confession of the fraud, was out of the question. Were he not bound in honour to the friend, to whom he owed everything, not to divulge the secret; could he for very shame make it known that for years he had been living and thriving and gaining fame by another man's brains? True, the situation had been acquiesced in by the other man, but would that be accepted as an excuse by the world which had hailed him, Geoffrey Herriard, as a supremely clever fellow? The world would feel it had been swindled out of its applause; it would turn and resent the cheat.

Then, supposing he cared nothing for the world and its sneers, that he was prepared to brazen the matter out, should it come to light, to let its success justify the trick, how would it be with Alexia? Could he ever hope to rehabilitate himself in her eyes? He told himself, he knew it with absolute conviction, that she was as the soul of honour; how could he declare himself to her as an incarnation of falsehood? Sometimes he felt he could wish that she were guilty of this charge; it would at most have been a venial crime, and it would bring them a little nearer to an equality in wrongdoing.

Then, often, in the conflict of his love, he would wish that he could break himself free of Gastineau: that he could run alone now, looking upon the past partnership as a term of mere pardonable tutelage. Then honour, never driven out from his false life, would rise and rebuke him for ingratitude. Still, he would argue, the bond between himself and Gastineau could scarcely be expected to run for the term of their lives. It would have to be determined sooner or later; and, after all, the benefit derived from the partnership was in some degree mutual. The sword which Gastineau had put into his hand, and the skill in fence which he had taught him, had been greatly used to stab the disabled fencer's rivals and enemies, to prevent them from profiting by the disappearance of their old adversary. In the intoxicating whirl of success which had hurried him onwards and upwards, Herriard had not found pause to realize the true, inevitable logic of his position. Love was now the Nemesis which was bringing it bitterly home to him.

And that same night the foreshadowing of another and totally unthought-of contingency rose to disturb him. This time it came from his fellow guest, and in this way.

The men had bid the Countess good-night, and had gone down to the Count's study to smoke and chat before separating. Presently their host began to ask the Professor about his work, and then it was that Herriard learned a fact which gave him food for thought, welcome or unwelcome, he could not for the moment decide. He had met Dr. Hallamar several times already, had accepted without further question the fact that he was one of Vienna's most distinguished pathologists, and although inclined to wonder that one so eminent and naturally sought after at home should spend so much time in England, had, from a reluctance to talk "shop," which his good breeding prompted, spoken little to the doctor of their respective professions. But now he was for the first time to be made aware of Hallamar's specialty.

The basis on which the Professor's fame, now European, rested, was the treatment of spinal disease and lesions, in the practice of which he had performed some marvellous cures. And Herriard had up to that moment never been aware of this.

"Severe spinal injuries are not, then, necessarily incurable? " he asked, waking up to the knowledge and the interest the subject held for him, as he joined in the conversation with somewhat remarkable eagerness.

"Certainly not," was the doctor's laconic reply.

"Even when the patient has been deprived of the use of the lower limbs? "

Hallamar gave a shrug. "Some cases are incurable, yes. But it has been my privilege to cure many which had been pronounced hopeless."

"The results of accidents, say railway accidents? "

"Certainly. It is to railway accidents that very many, if not the majority, of these cases of total loss of power in the lower limbs from shock are to be attributed."

"And you cure them, Professor? "

Hallamar bowed, with a little deprecating smile. "I have the happiness to cure many."

"Of course, Herriard," Count Prosper struck in.

"That is why the Professor is here. One does not travel a thousand miles to make experiments: one need not leave Vienna for that, eh? But what is fame? Here is Herriard, a great man at the Bar and in Parliament who has never heard of the wonders which Professor Rudolph Hallamar performs."

"When one is deeply immersed in one's own profession, one has little opportunity for looking round at the work of other men in other spheres," the doctor observed, in polite excuse. "I have found that pathological work has little interest for healthy laymen."

"Nevertheless," Herriard replied, with more truth than the two other men gave him credit for, "your work, now I have heard of it, does interest me exceedingly."

CHAPTER XII

THE PROFESSOR IS PUZZLED

IN spite of the sceptical attitude which Gastineau seemed inclined to maintain towards it, the evidence of the man Campion, having been closely sifted and tested, was regarded on all hands as practically conclusive, and certain to win the case for the Countess Alexia.

The mouthpieces of public opinion, as is usual in such cases, hastened to hedge, and the vane of prejudice showed signs of swinging round. The defendants and their advisers were now concentrating their energies upon getting out of an awkward position with least damage to their purses and reputations: and it was generally admitted that this new evidence, although it went but a little way towards proving who was the slayer of Captain Martindale, must at least, if unshaken, exonerate the Countess.

Still the mystery remained almost as deep as ever. Who, every one now began to ask, was the mysterious man whom Campion saw? A scrutiny among the list of the guests failed to give any hopeful clue, and only served to increase the puzzle. For there had been a great crowd at Vaux House that night. The ball had been one of those entertainments which great hostesses give periodically to include all who can have any sort of claim upon their hospitality. Cards had been sent out to every one of the Lancashires' acquaintance, social, political, and casual; there had been the usual crush, a constant stream of incomers and outgoers, and no record kept of those who actually were present. How could the identity of one man be discovered? Campion was confident that he would recognize him; but where was the chance of bringing into review before him the hundreds of men who had been included in that big social sweeping-up? The dead man might be supposed to have had enemies, disappointed rivals of the notorious supplanter: but that was only vague conjecture; nothing definite of any one was known.

But one evening Herriard rushed up to the house in Mayfair with a great piece of news. To his discomfiture Gastineau was, for the second time during their acquaintance, denied him. Hencher had the same tale as before to tell. Mr. Murray had had a very bad day; had been and still was in great pain; the seizure would surely go off soon, and then he would see Mr. Herriard, but not now; he was sure Mr. Herriard would understand and would be kind enough to return in an hour or two.

Herriard turned away from the door, his disappointment at the delay merged in remorse for what he told himself was cruelty and vile ingratitude. Here was this man who had been to him more than a friend or a brother, who had been, from a worldly point of view at least, his good genius, the mainspring of his success, lying writhing in pain, while he, selfish coward, with the healer, this great Viennese specialist at his very door, hesitated to bring him to his succour. For it was now some days since he had known the field of Dr. Hallamar's surgical skill; he had, amid great pressure of work, so much must be admitted in his excuse, debated the question with himself, and hesitated as to his course. Why had he delayed? His conscience told him that it was because Gastineau's recovery meant his own ruin. With an active life again open to him it was not to be supposed that his master would care to continue the strange partnership. Besides, would he not at once become his rival, and, with the shining forth again of the stronger natural light, must not his artificial beam be effectually paled? Still, these considerations were not, he told himself, those which a man of honour could entertain. His duty to his friend and helper was clear. He must do it, and chance the consequences, relying upon Gastineau's generosity and, perhaps, gratitude.

He was not so certain of these. There came at times into Gastineau's eyes an ugly, wolfish look, a cold, merciless gleam that seemed to say that nothing but the physical strength was lacking for him to fall upon and rend any one who might stand in his way. And on such occasions Herriard had, in spite of himself, experienced a kind of satisfaction from the thought that the man lying before him with the fierce, pitiless will was crippled; that the bitter, unscrupulous soul was fettered in that prison of the half-dead body. At times Gastineau would almost frighten his pupil when for a moment he unleashed the hounds of his almost Satanic spite; then he would laugh off the outburst, and ascribe it to his condition. But there was no doubt that fear, though scarcely acknowledged, had something to do with Herriard's hesitation in the matter of calling in Dr. Hallamar.

Impatient and self-reproachful, Herriard went into the Park. He was in no mood to go home or to the

House of Commons, he would wait about near at hand for an hour or so until he could see Gastineau. The news he had to tell him was momentous, and then he was resolved to broach the subject of the Austrian specialist without further delay. He could not bear to think of his friend lying there helpless in paroxysms of agony while he, who owed him everything, was inhuman enough to withhold the healing hand.

As he paced up and down the stretches of path, chafing and remorseful, it occurred to him that just across the way was Green Street, where he could get Dr. Hallamar's address and so save time, for he was determined that, with Gastineau's consent, not an hour more should be lost in calling in the great surgeon. As he waited to cross the drive, whom should he see coming towards him but the very man who was in his mind.

"Ah, Doctor, well met!" he greeted him. "I was just on my way to our friends the von Rohnburgs to ask for your address."

Hallamar bowed. "For the few days longer I remain in England I am staying at the *Hotel Britannia.* Can I be of service to you? You are interested in my work, yes?"

"You are very good, Doctor. I was going to propose that you should visit a dear friend of mine. I only wish that I had known of your work sooner."

The Doctor bowed again. "Your friend suffers from a spinal affection?"

"Yes. The result of a railway accident. He is, poor fellow, a helpless cripple. I should almost fear beyond even your powers of healing. He was terribly hurt, and for days after the accident it was thought he could not possibly live."

Hallamar, beneath his professional reticence, was evidently interested.

"A bad case, doubtless," he observed. "But bad cases are not necessarily the least curable. It may seem brutal to a layman, but we rather rejoice in bad cases."

"Then I think this one ought to delight you," Herriard suggested with a laugh. "It seems to me as bad a case as you could have in a patient who continues to live. And it must be a bad symptom, at least for him, poor fellow, that he suffers at times a martyrdom of pain."

Hallamar's face suddenly changed from an expression of sympathetic interest to one of surprise and polite incredulity. "Pain? " he repeated, "not as the result of spinal paralysis? "

"Yes," Herriard replied, "so he tells me. He suffers terrible paroxysms of pain at times. Why, is that a rare symptom? "

"Unheard of," the Professor answered, beginning now to regard Herriard as a witness, whose testimony was too inexact and irresponsible to be accepted. "Certainly," he added reflectively, "the pain you speak of may result from some other cause, some lesion in a part of the body unaffected by the spinal shock. Your friend was perhaps hurt elsewhere in the accident? "

"No," Herriard replied. "I am pretty sure of that. At least the doctors said so at the time."

"H'm! " Hallamar could not understand it, but was scarcely inclined to accept the symptoms on hearsay, "The pain your friend complains of is in the head perhaps? " he suggested, interested in spite of the untrustworthiness of the report.

"The head! No, the back," Herriard corrected. "He told me so."

The Professor shook his head. "It could not be."

"A man," Herriard objected, "be he ever so shattered and paralyzed, would scarcely mistake a pain in the head for one in the back, would he? "

Hallamar evidently thought it not worth while to pursue the argument.

"Hardly," he agreed. "Still in the absence of any other injury a headache is all that we could prognose." Then, in answer to the other's perplexed expression, he added, "You see Mr. Herriard, it is a very simple and safe assertion to make. Shock and injury to the spine produce paralysis of the nerve ganglions and consequent loss of sensation; and where there is no sensation there can be no pain. The telegraph wires, so to speak, between the brain and the supposed seat of pain are severed; how then can the sensation of pain be communicated? You must have misunderstood your friend. Well, this is an unprofitable discussion. If you would like me to see the case I have still a few days more in England, and if a cure by my treatment seemed likely I might even arrange to extend my stay."

"Indeed I should," Herriard answered readily. "I have been reproaching myself for having let the opportunity of obtaining your advice so far slip by."

Dr. Hallamar took out his note-book. "Will you give me your friend's name and address? "

In a moment the idea of caution, which Gastineau's position imposed, flashed upon Herriard. "Would you mind my leaving the matter for an hour or two? " he suggested. "I hope I do not seem ungracious, but perhaps I ought to speak to my friend first, although it is not conceivable that he could have any objection to putting himself under your treatment. I am going to see him directly, and will leave a message at your hotel later in the evening."

There was a curious look in the Professor's eyes as he returned the note-book to his pocket, a look into which Herriard read a little pique at his seemingly unreasonable hesitation. But he misread it.

"I presume," said Herriard, as they turned and walked together towards Piccadilly, "you have found some interesting cases to have kept you over here so long?"

"I have," Hallamar answered with some reserve. "It has been to my advantage to stay here."

"Ah, bigger fees than at home," Herriard said to himself. "You have, I suppose, the monopoly of your treatment?" he added aloud.

"Certainly I have," the Doctor replied, a little tartly. "Why should I not reap the reward of my discovery? The attitude of the medical profession, here especially, is antagonistic to innovation and novelty. I meet them in their own spirit. They withheld recognition, I withhold my secret."

"One cannot blame you. But surely, Professor, they recognize the results of your treatment?"

Hallamar gave a shrug. "Grudgingly, oh, yes. Naturally they hate a man to succeed where they must fail. It shows up their incompetence. Now, tell me, this friend of yours. How long has he been afflicted?"

"Between three and four years."

"Ah, yes! He met with a railway accident, I think you said?"

"Yes."

"In England?"

"No, abroad," Herriard answered guardedly.

"So!" The same curious look was on Hallamar's face. "He is in London?"

"Yes, in Mayfair."

"In Mayfair? So! A convenient distance." He stopped suddenly and held out his hand. "Well, I will go across and get a cab; I have some writing to do before dinner. You will see your friend and let me know this evening? My time is short."

"Certainly, in an hour or two," Herriard replied, and they parted.

It was with a considerably lightened conscience that Herriard presently made his way to Gastineau's. Hencher told him that his master was now much better and would be glad to see him. When he went up Gastineau seemed to be dozing, but roused himself and greeted him with his usual languid cordiality. But there was no languor in the eyes, they were bright and alert as ever.

"I have had another bad bout," he said apologetically. "I am so sorry, Geof, not to have seen you just now, only I might have been more sorry if I had. Now, you have something to tell me?"

"I have a good deal to tell you. First of all a great piece of news. Our new witness Campion has seen and recognized the man we are after."

Over Gastineau's face fell the smile of half-amused interest, with which one listens to an important trifle from a child. "Not the man whom he saw getting out of the window?"

"Yes. The very man. He is ready to swear to it."

"Ah, then you have him?"

"Unfortunately, no. He has been seen and recognized and that is all."

"Ah, that 's a pity." To Herriard in any other mood his reception of the news would have been irritating. He seemed wilfully incapable of anticipating any advantage from this evidence. "And why did Mr. Campion stop there? "

"He saw the man in a cab last evening. Before he could get another to follow him up he had lost sight of it," Herriard explained.

"Ah, that was a pity," Gastineau repeated, with the same sarcastic drawl.

But the other ignored his tone. "Of course it was a terrible pity. Still, it has established that the man we want is about, and moreover it has refreshed Campion's memory as to his identity."

"Everything at the same time resting upon the said Campion's word."

"My dear Gastineau, why will you persist in being so sceptical? " Herriard protested, at last a little irritated. "No one but yourself sees any reason to doubt the fellow. He has never contradicted himself, or swerved from the straightforward story he first told."

"Oh, he is not a fool, I grant you."

"And I am positive he is not a knave. I wish you could see him."

Gastineau gave an ugly laugh. "Thank you; I don't want to. It is unfortunate, seeing his seems to be a pretty piece of dovetailed evidence, but I do not believe in your Mr. Campion."

"It is prejudice," Herriard expostulated.

"Call it what you like," Gastineau returned. "I think you will find that I am right. This last move of his was exactly what circumstances required, and is precisely what I should have expected. How does he describe the man he saw? "

"A dark man with black hair, a pale face and piercing eyes. It is by the eyes, he says, that he would recognize him anywhere."

"And you have not yet found out which of the Duchess's guests answers to that description? "

"That is not easy," Herriard replied, with a smile.

"No," Gastineau returned. "I quite agree with you, it is rather vague. And now, what is Mr. Campion himself like? "

"Campion? " Herriard repeated, with a look of surprise at the question.

"Let us have his description, as I have not seen him."

"Oh, there is nothing remarkable about him. He is a somewhat thick-set man of five and thirty, with rather a good, frank face."

"You can see that? He is clean-shaven? "

"No; he wears a short brown beard."

"Ah! Well, my dear Geof, I hope it may turn out that my scepticism is unjustified."

"I have every reason to think it will," Herriard returned, in a rather nettled tone, as he closed the subject. "And now, my dear friend," he proceeded, in an altered manner, "I have another matter to discuss with you and one of which I hope you will think more favourably."

"Why not, Geof? " Gastineau responded, with his disarming smile. "Come, we don't often disagree. What is it? "

"Nothing less than a great chance of your recovery."

If he had watched the other's face for a joyful sign, he did not find it. He could only set down the absence of any sign of eagerness to Gastineau's great power of self-control. A curious gleam, which might mean anything, flashed into his eyes, that was all.

"Ah, tell me."

"I can't wonder that you don't seem to believe it," Gastineau's manner forced Herriard to say. "But I have come across a great man, a Viennese specialist, over here just now, who has performed wonderful cures in cases like yours." He went on to tell him all he knew of Dr. Hallamar.

Gastineau received the news with, to all appearance, a singular apathy; only his eyes, which were fixed on Herriard, gave evidence of a curious interest in the story.

"Yes," he commented at length when Herriard had said all he had to tell, "it seems wonderful, and well worth trying."

"I am thankful to hear you say that," Herriard exclaimed heartily. "I was afraid from your manner that your fit of scepticism was going to include Dr. Hallamar and his treatment."

Gastineau smiled. "I don't say it does not. Still, as a drowning man, I am thankful for any straw to clutch at. How long do you say this Dr. Hallamar has been in England?"

It was an awkward question, and none the less so from the pointed manner of its putting. "He has been over here some little time," Herriard answered self-consciously. "Stupidly I never thought to interest myself in the man or his particular line, and have only just found out his specialty. I have been reproaching myself ever since."

"Not for long, I hope?" Herriard told himself there was something behind the words, but it may have been that he was unduly sensitive on the point.

"No, not for long, happily," he replied. "Now," he added, rising, "you will let me go off and fetch him round to you this very evening?"

Gastineau put out a protesting hand. "My dear Geof, don't fly off at a tangent. I have waited so long that a few hours can hardly make a difference. Remember, even eminent surgical wonder-workers must dine."

"Still," Herriard urged, "I had better let him know without delay."

"We will," Gastineau returned quietly; "I will write him a note myself, and Hencher shall take it to his hotel at once. Will you give me my writing-flap?"

"I really think I had better go myself," Herriard objected. "He may not know who you are, and so delay——"

"I will tell him and mention your name," Gastineau said, already beginning to write. "I would rather you stayed with me: I have a little something to say to you."

So Herriard looked through a magazine while the other wrote. Hencher was presently summoned and ordered to take a hansom to the *Hotel Britannia*, to deliver the note into Dr. Hallamar's own hands, and to bring back an answer.

"You had something to say to me?" Herriard asked, when the man had gone.

"I had," Gastineau replied. "It is a matter which I am sure will be less repugnant to you than it is to me. But I am forced by circumstances to mention it. You know, my dear Geof," he continued, as Herriard sat in silence, wondering what was coming, "you know

I have never asked you for any share in the more material rewards of the success to which I may claim to have helped you. I have always hoped that the need for any suggestion of the sort might never arise. Unfortunately it has arisen."

"Not unfortunately, my dear friend," Herriard broke in responsively. "I am only too glad if you are going to give me the opportunity of reducing in a small degree my immense debt to you which I could never hope to repay."

"I know that, Geof," Gastineau replied. "I was sure of it. Still I have never, as you know, till now, contemplated any financial adjustment between us. As it is, the present question of my ways and means which I have been going into results in my being in need of a thousand pounds."

"My dear Gastineau, I am only too delighted that you have given me another proof of your friendship by telling me. Luckily I have quite that at my bankers, and will draw you a cheque at once."

"Thank you, Geof," Gastineau said simply, and Herriard taking a blank cheque from his letter-case proceeded to fill it in.

Presently Hencher came back with a note to say that Doctor Hallamar would call early next morning.

"I will come round in the first half-hour I can snatch," Herriard said, as he took leave. "His will be to me the most anxiously awaited of all the verdicts I have been concerned in."

There was a strangely sarcastic smile on Gastineau's face as he replied, "I fear Geoffrey Herriard is not going to win his case this time."

So with much food for perplexity, Herriard left him.

CHAPTER XIII

A MAYFAIR COUNSELLOR

HERRIARD had indeed much to exercise his mind that night. Thinking over his interview with Gastineau, several things puzzled him. To begin with, he was at a loss to understand his friend's continued attitude of disbelief in the value of Campion's evidence. He would never even be brought to admit that there might be anything in it beyond an obvious trick for obtaining money. Every one else held the testimony to be invaluable; Gastineau alone maintained a rigid scepticism.

Then Herriard could scarcely understand Gastineau's reception of the news about Dr. Hallamar. It was to have been expected that he, lying there a helpless cripple with an abnormally active brain, his spirit full of energy, and the desire for action, so cruelly fettered by his helpless limbs, would at least have shown more eagerness at the hope suddenly brought to him. As it was, he had fallen in with the suggestion of submitting his case to the great specialist as coolly, even casually, as though it had been merely a question of sending round to the chemist's for a box of lozenges. True, he had lost no time about writing, and here arose another question which perplexed Herriard.

Why had he insisted upon writing himself to Dr. Hallamar? He had written the note, had sealed it up without communicating one word of its contents, and had sent it off by Hencher; whereas the more natural course would have been to let him, Herriard, who had an acquaintance with the Doctor, and had already half arranged the visit, be the messenger. He had kept him there, ostensibly to speak of his need for a thousand pounds; but surely a few seconds would have settled that simple matter. The money could not have been transferred before banking hours next day; the question might have waited till later in the evening, for Herriard, had he gone, would have returned with the Doctor, as he had practically arranged to do. Why, again, when Hallamar had expressed himself as at liberty and willing to attend that evening, had he put off his visit till the morning? Had Gastineau in his note suggested this? And, if so, why the delay? Herriard could not make it all out. Nor why his friend had suddenly found the pressing need of a thousand pounds. He had always understood that Gastineau had, during his active life, made a sufficient fortune to assure him easy, if not affluent, circumstances for the rest of his days. His house was his own freehold, and, although it was furnished in the most luxurious and costly fashion, still that had been all capital expenditure and paid for long since: his current expenses as an invalid, in an existence of the strictest seclusion, with the smallest possible household, could not be heavy. With the single exception of indulging a hobby for buying valuable books, he had, so far as Herriard knew, no extravagances. As his debtor he was only too glad to let him have the money, for the idea that all the profit of their partnership was going to his share had often given him qualms; still, why this sudden demand for a thousand pounds? Gastineau might have told him; their relations assuredly justified confidence; nevertheless his reasons had been studiously vague. A veil of mystery seemed to be falling between the two men; it was useless to blink the fact that of late their relations had been gradually changing. Sometimes there had seemed, on Gastineau's side at least, to be a certain tacit antagonism between them. Herriard could not understand it. Was his friend thinking of making yet another man's fortune? Had he, himself, any cause for self-reproach in his conduct towards his mentor? He could hardly charge himself with that. Until the question of Campion's evidence had cropped up they had never had even a difference of opinion. Herriard had never found himself in a position to dispute the cleverer man's judgment until Gastineau's assumption of that unaccountable attitude towards the witness on whom so much depended, and his refusal to make, at least, the best of it.

One explanation suggested itself, and it was that his friend's brain might be gradually becoming affected. It was not a pleasant solution, yet more natural than any other alternative which might vaguely present itself. He had that evening questioned Gastineau about the pain which at times made him unfit to receive even him, his one friend: telling him that Dr. Hallamar could not understand the spinal injury at this stage causing him more than irritation, and perhaps a little smarting or burning. Gastineau had replied rather tartly that he might be allowed to be the best judge of his own sufferings, and that a man would feel pain in spite of the theories of the whole medical faculty that he had no business to have it.

So Herriard found no solution of his perplexities; the more he thought of his friend's conduct the more strange and unaccountable did it appear; he could only postpone the elucidation for the light of further developments. And the first that came was one which gave him no help towards enlightenment.

When, early the next day, he went to the house in Mayfair to learn the result of the specialist's visit, Gastineau told him calmly that the verdict was adverse.

"No; Dr. Hallamar says he can do nothing for me," the patient reiterated, as Herriard seemed to question his first announcement. "It is a bad case of spinal paralysis following a crushing lesion, and hopelessly incurable. Happily I was never inclined to indulge in any real hope of a cure."

"But," Herriard protested, "I understood that it was in treating serious spinal lesions that Hallamar was so successful. I don't understand his giving you up at least without a trial."

"Hallamar is manifestly a very clever man, a genius possibly, in his own line," Gastineau replied; "and your really clever man always knows his limitations. It is only pushing fools and quacks who blunder on till their own incompetency pulls them up sharply. This man, being no fool, and his interest being all the other way, tells me, after a careful examination, that he can do nothing for me. Neither you nor I, my dear Geof, need go behind that verdict."

"I am sorry," said Herriard, in a tone of genuine sympathy, "very sorry. I had set great hopes on his curing you."

Gastineau's harsh laugh seemed the outcome of repressed disappointment. "You thought this wonder-worker could revive the dead, for that is practically what I am. Even a Hallamar cannot perform miracles. As it turns out, my dear boy, you need have no cause for regret that you did not bring this medico to me sooner."

Something in the tone of the last words put Herriard on his defence. "I give you my word, Gastineau——" he began warmly. But the other stopped him with a gesture.

"Please don't trouble to protest," he interrupted. "No doubt you did everything for the best, and, as it happens, could have done no more. I am here till I die, and it is just as well to know it. Let us dismiss the subject with a decree nisi. Now, can I help you with anything to-day, or is it all plain sailing?"

Two days afterwards it happened that the Duchess of Lancashire was at home to her more select circle of intimates and courtiers, among the latter being Dormer Greetland, whose profession it was to go everywhere, that is to say, to every house worth entering where he could get admittance. It was the eve of the great libel trial, the last stage which it was now confidently expected would triumphantly exonerate Countess Alexia von Rohnburg from the stigma she had borne.

"I suppose it is quite certain that the Countess will come out of it with flying colours?" Lady Rotherfield enquired of the society newsvendor, a little anxiously, seeing that, after a period of avoidance which might be called judicious or snobbish, according to one's mental view of the conduct of her tribe, she had that very afternoon left cards at the tabooed house in Green Street.

"She is bound to, on this man Campion's evidence," Greetland assured her sympathetically. "They say the newspaper men are quite prepared for at least a month's imprisonment and a thousand pounds fine, which, of course, means nothing to a man like Brailsford. They say he has given Burwoods carte blanche to furnish his room in Holloway in the most elaborate fashion."

"Ah!" Lady Rotherfield did not much care about the peccant editors and their schemes for minimizing the rigours of an enforced sojourn in an unfashionable latitude. She was more interested in her tactical mistake towards the von Rohnburgs who might still be a power in her world.

"I suppose," she murmured, "everybody has been holding off a little? Of course things did at one time look very black against the poor Countess."

Greetland gave a shrug of sympathy which conveyed a sort of confession of apology for pardonable shortsightedness. "One hardly liked to call while the case hung in the balance," he protested. "It would have seemed intrusive and prying; and, naturally, one hates the idea of that."

So spoke Mr. Dormer Greetland whose whole existence was one long intrusion, and for whom earth held no greater pleasure than was to be derived from prying and the impertinent study of other folks' weaknesses and distress.

"Ah, then people have not been calling? I wanted to ask you, Mr. Greetland. You always know the rights and wrongs of everything, and nowadays people, who ought to know better, are given to such provoking inaccuracies, don't you know."

The recognized fountain of scandal and arbiter of the latest correct conduct accepted the compliment as merely a truism. "It is a pity," he pronounced, "that ignorant people will prattle absurdities, and that they find others to believe them. Why, I can assure you, Lady Rotherfield, that I have to spend half my time in contradicting the most ridiculous fairy tales that idiots rush about with. It is enough to disgust one with the present state of things in society."

"Yes," Lady Rotherfield assented, "as though it were not bad enough to have all these outsiders pushing themselves into our houses, without their bringing their misleading half-knowledge of our affairs with them. So the Countess will be quite rehabilitated? I am so glad. She is really so clever and charming, and one shudders to think what would have been the result if she had been unable to establish her innocence; anyhow, *declassées* have such a terrible time, and give it to their friends. I suppose it would not do to invite them to dine till the case is really over?"

Greetland pouted dubiously. "There is, of course, a certain risk, but it is scarcely worth considering, as the case stands. On the other hand, it would be a good move to show confidence, where one is practically safe, and an invitation sent off before the verdict is given would re-establish the *entente cordiale*. I know for a fact that Herriard is absolutely certain of getting a conviction, and of course that means the triumph of Alexia."

"Just so," Lady Rotherfield agreed. "One may as well send them to-night an invitation to dine next week. So many people will like to meet her now."

"Yes, indeed," the social Autolycus agreed. "The Countess will be absolutely the rage, and it will be quite the smart thing to give dinners to meet her. So I should not delay, if you want to get her next week. There is sure to be a rush for her."

"Ah, yes, to be sure. People are so eager to make the best of these little disappointments. I 'll send out cards directly I get home. You 'll come, dear Mr Greetland? You must come. What day will suit you?"

"I have n't a night for the next three weeks," answered the much desired gossip.

"Oh, but you must really come," Lady Rotherfield urged. "What people next week can you throw over best? "

The *preux chevalier* consulted a gold-bound note-book. "Let me see," he murmured, as, with an air of due importance, he ran through his thronging engagements. "You know I 'll do what I can for you, dear lady. Tuesday, the Andovers; Lady Andover would never forgive me if I threw her over; Wednesday, the Zoylands; half the Cabinet will be there, I must go and make Lord Sarum tell me what we are really going to do about Russia; Thursday, the Tudor-Fitzralphs; I am to dine and go to the play with some poor people who have just bought the Duke of St. Ives's house in Piccadilly; they are hopeless outsiders, by way of being millionaires, of course, and all that, which is so tiresome, but I have promised to do what I can for them, and it would be an awful blow if I did n't turn up."

"Surely you might throw the wretched creatures over," his would-be hostess suggested. "Millionaires have no feelings, to speak of, or they would never have become millionaires. Surely you are not going to let such absurd people stand in your way? "

"Oh, no," Greetland responded; they are too utterly impossible and beneath consideration. One would think as little of throwing them over as of pitching a pebble into the Serpentine. But the difficulty is that I have got Lady Hester Nayland to consent to go, and if I am not there she will have no one to speak to."

"Why does she go? " was Lady Rotherfield's not unnatural enquiry.

"Well," Greetland explained, "it appears that Lady Hester, who has taken up good works since Ormskirk jilted her, landed the millionaire people the other day at a bazaar with a lot of rubbish at fancy prices. They are as keen on getting something more for their money as she is for their money. So she has graciously consented to dine with them on condition that she goes into dinner with me and is not expected to speak much to the *nouveaux riches.* Consequently, if I fail, poor Lady Hester will be reduced to silence for a whole evening, and you know, to put it mildly, she has no impediment in her sppech."

"No, indeed, "Lady Rotherfield replied, "except the impediment it made to her marriage. They say Ormskirk was absolutely stunned, and for a relief has gone out to some spot on the Sahara where he won't hear the sound of a human voice for six months."

"Yes," Greetland said, "I 'm afraid it would be the refinement of cruelty to leave Lady Hester in the lurch, and she does in her heart so hate the *haute Juiverie.* No, I see I am dining with the Ambroses on Friday. They are unexceptional themselves, but rather injudicious in their choice of friends. One never knows what one is in for there. I once had to meet at their house an awful person from the City who talked in multiples of a million, and whose principal capital seemed to be capital I's. He had brought an absurd wife, festooned with diamonds like a segment of a transformation scene. I told Lady Ambrose that if she ever invited these farcical creatures again, which I hoped she would not, she ought to arrange to have a lime-light man to throw different colours on the pantomime person to vary the monotony of the ill-gotten gems.

"No wonder," Lady Rotherfield observed, "diamonds are going out of fashion with us."

"Very well, then," Greetland decided, "it must be Friday. If poor Lady Ambrose will be injudicious about the people she asks one to meet, she must expect an occasional disappointment."

"Friday, then," said the lady. "It is quite good of you. I will secure the von Rohnburgs at once. Ah, dear Duchess," she went on, as their hostess joined them, "we were just talking of this tiresome case. How you, to say nothing of the dear Countess Alexia, must have been worried, and how glad you must be at the prospect of seeing the last of it. Will the Duke have to give evidence again?"

"Oh, yes, I 'm afraid so," the Duchess answered, with a touch of ruefulness. "The poor Duke has been bound over to appear again just as though he were a common malefactor who would be likely to abscond."

"How absurd," Lady Rotherfield exclaimed, with as much show of indignation as she could command.

"Yes," her Grace pursued. "I call it abominable and most idiotic that there should be no distinction made between people in our position and the common herd whose native air is the atmosphere of a police court. Why should a man like Lancashire be forced to hang about the horrid dingy place, jostled by all sorts of unpleasant people, and then be insulted and browbeaten by unmannerly lawyers who would not dare to speak to him anywhere else? I call it too disgusting."

"The Duke must hate it," Greetland suggested sympathetically.

"Naturally. He is most indignant about the whole business. And the police-court ordeal, he says, is so unconstitutional in his case. How can men in Lancashire's position expect to be looked up to, and to keep up their dignity, if they are liable to be placed in these ridiculous positions and made a laughing-stock for the mob?"

"Just so," Lady Rotherfield agreed, in a tone of compassionate indignation. "That is what I always maintain. If Dukes and so forth are to have their weaknesses exposed and to be exhibited as no different from ordinary humanity, what becomes of their prestige and influence? They ought certainly to be exempt from these public exposures."

This was going somewhat farther towards the truth than the Duchess had intended. She looked rather black, while Greetland's face was a study of amusement struggling with the professional decorum due towards the Peerage.

"The Duke," said her Grace tartly, "talks of bringing the question before the House of Lords."

"Don't you think, Duchess," suggested Lady Rotherfield sweetly, "that it would be wiser to let it drop? You are not likely to have another affair of the sort here, one would hope, and if it is debated, that terrible *farceur*, Evesham, is sure to make fun of it and, incidentally, of the dear Duke."

The Duchess's face lowered darker than ever. She was very tenacious of her monopoly of gibing at her consort's stupidity. Greetland, who had plenty of tact, natural and acquired, was about to intervene with a change of subject, when Aubrey Playford, who had just come in, joined them with a suggestion in his manner of something important to tell.

"Have you heard the latest news, Duchess? " he asked quickly, as he touched her hand.

"No; what is it? " the Duchess enquired, in some trepidation as she noticed the little malicious gleam of pleasure in his eyes.

"Anything to do with the case? " Greetland asked casually. It was natural for him to hate people who got before him with news.

"Very much to do with the case," Playford replied. "This new witness, Campion, whose evidence was to settle it off-hand——"

"What! " exclaimed Lady Rotherfield breathlessly, "he has not absconded? "

"Worse, for him, at any rate," Playford answered. "He has met with a fatal accident."

The news was so startling that for a few moments no one could speak.

"How unfortunate! " Lady Rotherfield commented mechanically.

"How dreadful!" chimed in the Duchess, trying to calculate how the incident would affect her interest in the case.

"But is it true? " Greetland questioned sceptically. He always made a point of challenging the authenticity of news carried by other people.

"Undoubtedly true," Playford returned emphatically. "He was knocked down and run over by a hansom this evening, and, curiously enough, just here in Piccadilly, not a stone's throw from where he made out he originally saw Reggie Martindale's supposed murderer."

The propinquity of the tragedy slightly enchanced its impressiveness.

"And he is dead?" The Duchess asked the question.

Playford gave a decisive nod. "Died before they could get him to St. George's Hospital."

"Are they sure it is the same man?" Greetland suggested, holding tenaciously to his line of non-acceptance.

"Absolutely," Playford answered. "My man told me all about it. He saw the poor fellow being taken away in the ambulance. And I made a point of calling at the police-station to enquire if what I had heard was true. There is no doubt that the man was Campion; the Superintendent was quite positive. So I thought I would come and tell you at once, Duchess."

"It was very kind of you," the hostess replied, as graciously as her state of mind permitted. "Dear me, this distressing business seems unending."

"Poor Countess Alexia!" Greetland remarked, slyly watching Lady Rotherfield.

The prospective hostess of the unfortunate Countess had for the moment overlooked that consequence of the tragedy.

"Ah," she exclaimed, waking up to the fresh interest. "This poor man's death must make all the difference to her, must it not?"

"Decidedly," Playford answered, with a readiness bred of malice.

The Duchess had gone off to carry the news. Lady Rotherfield turned to Greetland.

"Oh, Mr. Greetland, how lucky this unpleasant news came just now. Fancy one's feelings if one had seen it in the papers to-morrow morning, when the invitations had been posted over-night! I do hope Lady Ambrose won't have another objectionable City person to inflict on you next Friday."

CHAPTER XIV

THE TRAGEDY DEEPENS

IT was a terrible and dismaying blow that had fallen so tragically upon the hopes of triumph and vindication. Herriard on his way to the Countess Alexia with the news—which had been sent to him at once—called at Gastineau's, being anxious to gather every grain of hope there might be of making the best of this bitter disappointment.

"I have not come to worry you any more about Campion," was Herriard's greeting, with a short bitter laugh of discomfiture. "The poor fellow will never give evidence now. He is dead."

Gastineau gave him a sharp glance of surprised enquiry. He was lying back in a state of greater listlessness than Herriard ever remembered to have seen in him since the first effects of the accident.

"Dead? How?"

Herriard told him. "It happened in Piccadilly, by the Green Park; within sight of Vaux House. And it is a bad blow for us, with all deference to your views."

"I fear I must continue in disagreement with you," Gastineau returned, with a confident smile. "I am of opinion that the cabman who knocked down the late Mr. Campion has unwittingly done your side a substantial service."

Herriard took an impatient turn across the room. "Gastineau, you carry your opinion, your scepticism, too far. Surely between us you need not make such a point of maintaining it so obstinately."

He spoke with a certain amount of heat, with the sense of disappointment stinging him doubly, in his heart and head.

As Gastineau's eyes followed his impatient movement they seemed to laugh subtly. "If," he said, "you will give the situation a moment's calm thought, my dear Geof, you will see what I mean by suggesting that by this man's death your client is no worse off, but, on the contrary, has gained an advantage."

"It would take a more penetrating intellect than mine to see that," Herriard returned, with ill-humoured sarcasm.

"At least let me try to put it to you," Gastineau rejoined, with a smile at the other's temper. "Now, take the position dispassionately. First of all, what are you going for? To clear Countess Alexia's reputation of the slander that has touched it. That, I grant you, with this man Campion's evidence you would have done triumphantly—if it had withstood all the hot attacks which would have been made upon it. The evidence he would have given, had he lived, is now common knowledge; his narrative, his uncontradicted narrative, has been published by enterprising journalists; everybody knows it. So you stand in the position to-day of having got your examination-in-chief before the public without any chance of cross-examination by the other side. Is not that a score? You have succeeded in getting the world's sympathy for your interesting client, and it will be augmented rather than diminished by this unlooked-for incident, which will assuredly be regarded as a cruel blow."

"As it is," Herriard murmured; beginning, however, to see the cloud's bright side.

"Of course," Gastineau agreed; "but it won't hurt you. It is far, far better for you than one shaky answer in the witness-box. Yes; to sum up, you have the *status quo ante,* with the sympathy transferred to your side, the dead man's uncontradicted, and, now, uncontradictable, evidence on record in the public mind. And you must remember that, in a case of this sort, it is the public, not the jury, which gives the real verdict. Yes, my dear Geof, you are to be congratulated, or, at least, the Countess is. Come! confess you see it."

"Oh, yes," Herriard answered, recovering somewhat from the blankness of his discomfiture; "I admit we are in a far better position now than before Campion turned up. Still, I cannot agree that we gain by his death. I am absolutely convinced that his evidence would have remained unshaken before Macvee's big guns; and I cannot understand why you have all along taken such a prejudiced view of the poor man and the genuineness of his testimony."

"It is scarcely worth while discussing it now," Gastineau replied, with a half yawn. "I am quite ready to admit that I may have been utterly wrong. Had it not been for the seriousness of the issue I could be sorry that the question of the stability of his evidence can never now be settled. As it is we may consign the question to the limbo of the great undecided, and rest content with the gain it has brought us. I suppose the poor fellow was dead when picked up?"

"No," Herriard answered; "he lived for ten minutes, and was able to give an account of the accident. It appears he was running after a cab, in which he had recognized again the man we are in search of, the man who is supposed to have killed Martindale. In his excitement poor Campion failed to notice a hansom which swung out of Berkeley Street, and ran him down."

"H'm! I quite agree with you, it is a pity," Gastineau observed, in an indifferently sceptical tone; "a pity that the all-important Mr. Campion has come to so unromantic an end. It would have been highly interesting to have seen what sort of a figure he would have cut in the witness-box, with Joshua Standish Macvee for a *vis-à-vis*."

"I can imagine but one result," Herriard replied, with a dry reserve. "Well, I am going on to Green Street to do what I can to lighten this blow. Your view of the matter will at least help me to do that."

"Yes," Gastineau agreed; "I think you may venture to congratulate Countess Alexia. The reckless cabby did your client no bad turn."

"Perhaps not," Herriard returned; "but we did not want to win like that."

"Better like that than not at all," Gastineau rejoined. "You now have the Countess practically cleared so far as the world is concerned. The passing of Campion rehabilitates her by providing a very plausible, if, to legal minds, somewhat unconvincing, solution of the mystery."

The pointed significance in his tone was not to be ignored. Herriard started up, impelled by the shock of a conviction then first realized. "Gastineau," he exclaimed, in a tone of protest, almost of indignation, "you are not going to tell me you think the Countess guilty? "

The other smiled meaningly. "My dear Geof, I am not blind to possibilities and probabilities, if you are; but then, perhaps, I have not the same reason."

It was the first time that Herriard had known his friend to sneer at him, and the tone of the last words stung him uncomfortably. In that instant he realized how the fissure between them was extending; and the situation which seemed so swiftly developing was made none the less unhappy by its incomprehensibility, by its being devoid of an adequate cause. A difference of opinion. Was that to dissolve the close partnership, that alliance of theirs against the world? It seemed pitifully absurd. Herriard had vowed that no act of his should help to widen the breach. It was curious how this case had come between them; there seemed such animus behind Gastineau's arguments, and as Herriard's feeling was all the other way, it became increasingly difficult for him to keep to his resolve. "My dear fellow, it is preposterous," was all he could trust himself to say. "I can hardly think you mean it seriously."

"I merely say that I see nothing inherently improbable in the suggestion," Gastineau replied, in his keen argumentative manner. "In fact, from the circumstantial evidence we have, the probabilities are, *pace* the late Mr. Campion, all the other way. I will simply put one point to you. Why and how should another man, the person whom Campion declared he saw, stab Martindale to death with an ornament from Countess Alexia's hair? Why should he want to do it at all? and, if so, why and how with that particular weapon? At least it points to the Countess being an accessory before the fact. Now I really should like to hear a good rebutting argument against that."

Herriard had turned away from him, and was leaning with his arms on the mantelpiece. "The argument is," he replied, in a voice low from restraint, "that the Countess lost the ornament. And my unshakable belief is that she had nothing to do with Martindale's death either as principal or accessory."

"Your argument is nebulously vague and just conceivable, but at the same time wildly improbable," Gastineau returned, in his quiet, cutting tone. "But that you seem not a little *épris* with your fair client I should not think you in earnest in putting it forward."

Herriard raised his head and turned to the couch. "Gastineau, if you really think the Countess guilty, for Heaven's sake, let the case never be mentioned between us again. We don't want to quarrel; it would ill become me to be at issue with you to whom I owe so much, but it is certain that if we pursue this subject we shall quarrel, since my whole sense revolts from your theory. So let it be taboo."

Gastineau laughed, and his laugh was as a sneer at the other's heated earnestness.

"We never should have come near to joining issue had you not let your heart run away with your head. A lawyer ceases to be a lawyer when he allows feelings and prejudices to interfere with his judgment. So far as our profession goes a man must be all head, a legal thinking machine, if you like. It is not perhaps an ideal equipment, but it is the only workable one."

"I dare say," Herriard replied, in a tone of doubtful conviction. "Happily, or unhappily, very few of us can quite succeed in stifling our private judgment of those with whom we have to deal."

"True. And the man who succeeds best in that makes the best lawyer, other things being equal," Gastineau returned dogmatically. "Now we won't quarrel, Geof, over the last word of this burning subject, but I must give it you in the form of a word of warning. Let me as an older man of the world than yourself, and as one who has nothing more to gain or lose in this world, put you on your guard against the state into which you are drifting."

"What do you mean?"

"I refer to the Countess Alexia. That is all, and I will say no more, except that if you let yourself go too far in that direction you will bitterly repent it."

Herriard repressed the words that sprang to his lips. "Very well, Gastineau," he responded simply; "I take your warning in the spirit in which it is given."

An inscrutable smile flitted across Gastineau's face, as he nodded in response to the other's words.

And so they parted.

Herriard went towards Green Street in a perplexed and uneasy state of mind. There could be only one explanation of Gastineau's warning, and it was that he believed Countess Alexia guilty. But that was utterly preposterous. Herriard comforted himself with the thought that his friend knew little of the Countess, having only met her casually in society years before. His was a hard, judicial brain; he would believe anything of anybody if the legal probabilities pointed to such a conclusion; the human element in the case, if not entirely ignored, would be reduced to an equation and governed by the law of mathematical chances. But, logic or no logic, the idea that the Countess might be guilty was monstrous. Knowing her as he did, Herriard was sure that she had not even the most venial and innocent connection with Martindale's death. Nor, putting bias away, could he find the slightest ground for discrediting Campion's testimony. Well, thank Heaven, the case would soon be brought, as he fully anticipated, to a happy conclusion, and his relations with the Countess need never again form the subject of argument.

"I have brought you bad news," he said to her when they met.

Alexia's face paled for an instant, as her eyes questioned him apprehensively. He told her what had happened, and the pros and cons of its probable effect upon the case.

"I am inclined to think we are not so very much worse off," he said, "by the poor fellow's death, shocking as it is, and greatly as we must regret it. You must not take it so much to heart, Countess," he added, for he could see how dismayed and anxious the news had made her.

"Oh, but I fear, I fear," she returned, in a low voice.

"Indeed you need not fear," he urged encouragingly.

"When I think what is at stake how can I help it? "

He leaned forward. "Countess, you have no cause for fear," he said half-interrogatively. The words were spoken more to give Gastineau's suggestion the lie than to satisfy any doubt in his own mind. Next moment he hated himself for the inflexion that made them seem a question. With the swift intuition of a clever woman she divined the subtle equivocalness of the speech. Perhaps she felt it was not altogether uncalled-for, that it was reasonable. She looked at him steadily, frankly, and her look sealed his self-condemnation.

"I have only one cause for fear," she said, "a miscarriage of justice, the possible success of a vile slander."

"I am sure of that, Countess," he replied, with a warmth bred of repentance. "And I should think none the less of you if your fear extended farther. But I have no dread at all of the issue of this case, and wish I could infect you with my certainty."

"I think you have," she responded, with an effort at conviction. "But in this world things go curiously wrong sometimes, and, while there is suspense, there must, to a woman, at least, be fear."

"I hate the thought of your fear," he said in a lower voice; "it seems to increase my responsibility."

Alexia smiled. "No, no, my friend," she protested, "you must not think that. You, at least, cannot fail; your victory is already gained."

"Not yet," he replied deprecatingly; "still, I am confident that it will be."

A sudden thought came to him; the conviction that if he were to put his fate to the touch it should be now; that to wait would be the timid, unchivalrous trick of an opportunist, and as he realized that the moment had come he stood dismayed. He glanced at the Countess, with a strange diffidence, for in his dealings with men and women confidence had become almost as second nature. The constrained silence that had come upon them seemed to prick him on; each second it lasted made the urgency cumulative. And yet words failed him. What could he say to her? How could he say it? His eyes rested on the graceful lines of her figure, the exquisite colouring and contour of her head. She was not a girl, but a woman of matured sensibilities for sympathy and love; the one woman he had met whom he longed to ask to share his life, the one woman in whose company he would be more content to face trouble than to pass a cloudless existence with any other. Yet how could he but hesitate? She was above him in rank; there was something royal in the very turn of her head, in the subtle splendour that seemed to exhale from her presence. True he was somebody now in the world; he had made his name both at the Bar and in the House. Then, with the encouraging thought, the spectre of his deceit rose up and stood between him and his love, till he wished she were guilty that they might meet on more equal terms. Still, that present one was the moment to be seized. That thought was insistent; it was under the shadow of this sharp disappointment that he must risk the question.

As he stood hesitating and tongue-tied, Alexia looked up, as it were with a glance of enquiry as to the reason of the silence. It was a provocative lifting of the deep grey eyes, and it drew him into speech as though moved by an enchanter's touch outside the pale of calculation.

"Countess," he said, "I wish I might, without offence, ask for the crown of my victory."

She seemed to shrink a little from him, as she replied in a low voice, yet steadily, "The victory is not yet won; the crown is of doubtful glory."

His tongue was loosened now. "Never to me," he declared with passion. "Countess, it is all that I covet in this world; it can never be anything less to me than pure gold. Ah, if I might ever hope to wear it! "

But she made no responsive sign. "It is not time to speak of that," she said, in a voice in which the feeling was so repressed that it seemed cold.

"If," he rejoined, in a like tone, "it may ever be, surely this is the time."

Again she looked at him; there was gratitude and, he thought, something yet more to be desired in her eyes. "No, my friend," she said, with gentle denial; "not now."

"Alexia," he pleaded, laying his hand on her arm, "let me tell you how I love you."

But again she shook her head, and moved away from the tentative caress. "No," she replied; "you must not speak a word of that to me."

"Not yet? "

She hesitated a moment or two, and in the pause his hopes swiftly grew. Then, almost in a whisper, the words came repeated, "Not yet."

As he realized what those words meant, joy thrilled him beyond all power of the restraint he owed her. "Alexia, my love! " The cry burst out from the rapture of his good fortune. But she turned quickly to him, putting out her hands protestingly.

"No, no, please; not that," she said, and in the entreaty there was a touch of command. "I know that you, of all men, will respect my wish."

"It is hard," he returned submissively, "but I must. If you knew how hard, dear Countess, you would forgive me."

"I have nothing to forgive," she replied simply; and for a while no more was spoken between them.

Then their talk reverted to the burning subject of the trial, till presently Count Prosper came in.

He had heard at his club the news of Campion's death, and the friends he was with had tried to lessen the shock it gave him.

"You have an excellent man in Herriard," Sir Perrott Aspall had remarked encouragingly.

"Could n't have a better," Baron de Daun had agreed. "Quite the best man at the Bar for that sort of case, since Paul Gastineau."

"By the way," another man of the group broke in, "talking of Gastineau, an extraordinary thing happened to me the other evening. As I was walking across the Green Park a man passed me whom I could have sworn was Paul Gastineau."

"What, *the* Paul Gastineau? " Sir Perrott asked, with a smile of toleration for another man's stupidity.

"*The* Paul Gastineau," the other maintained. "The K.C. Member for Starbury. I knew him well."

"But," Sir Perrott objected, with all the superiority which disbelief in the obviously impossible confers, "Paul Gastineau, the K.C., and all that, was killed some years ago in a railway accident in Spain."

"Yes," retorted the other; "that is just what made my seeing him in the Green Park so extraordinary."

CHAPTER XV

A HALF-WON VICTORY

DEPRIVED of its promised dramatic sensation scene, the trial which came on in the next week was, being mere repetition of what had been heard before, to all but the interested parties, a comparatively tame affair. By tacit consent the case was not mentioned again between Gastineau and Herriard. There were one or two points on which Geoffrey would have liked his mentor's advice, but he forebore to ask it; and, on the whole, was well content, save for the responsibility of Alexia's reputation which was in his hands, to take for once the whole burden of a big case on his shoulders.

He was nervous, more nervous than he had ever been before, but that was to be accounted for by other than professional reasons. Victory, he felt, would mean everything to him: yet there were moments when he could almost wish for defeat. It was something, however, to think that if he won, it would be by his own unaided conduct of the case, and somehow he felt that he would not care for Gastineau to have a hand in the victory.

Countess Alexia repeated her denial of all knowledge of how Captain Martindale came by his death with unswerving, convincing straightforwardness: the Duke of Lancashire had his uncomfortable quarter of an hour in the witness-box, but got off with less ridicule than might have been expected, although with a by no means modified conviction that persons of his class should be by law exempt from such appearances, or at least from cross-examination. The truculent and uncompromising Macvee made a fiercely argumentative appeal to common sense on behalf of his clients; Herriard an equally logical and more chivalrously passionate speech for the Countess, who was the real defendant, and at the end of a two days' trial, after an ominously long deliberation, the jury brought in a verdict of guilty against the peccant editors who were duly mulcted in heavy fines, and one, the worst offender, to a short term of imprisonment.

So the victory was gained; the popular appetite, which was getting rather tired of the food, was satisfied; yet, somehow, there seemed, after all, to be a cloud over it in place of the glorious sunshine there should have been. This feeling was borne uncomfortably in upon Geoffrey Herriard as he went back to his chambers in the Temple. There was joy in his heart: he could still feel in his own the grateful—might he not now think loving?—pressure of Alexia's hand when he had congratulated her and received for a reward a look that told him his happiness was assured. Yet, underneath all this elation, there lurked the thought that it was an unsatisfactory victory. Doubt, that terrible doubt, that hateful bugbear, had not been, as he had hoped, utterly and finally annihilated. The verdict had seemed half-hearted, as though gained by sympathy against men's harder judgment. Campion's testimony was, so to speak, in the air; but it had not been admitted, for there had been no time between his wounding and his death to find a magistrate to take his depositions.

Macvee had rather curled his lip at the lagging verdict. "What you people had better do now," he had said gruffly to Herriard as they gathered up their briefs, "is to move heaven and earth to find out who did kill Martindale. A pity for all parties Campion came to an untimely end; I should dearly like to have had him in that box."

"It is just as well for your client's liberty and pockets you had n't," Herriard had retorted, with a laugh. "The man and his evidence were absolutely genuine."

"They all are—in the solicitor's office," came the cynical reply. "Anyhow, I should have liked to try a touch of the acid—the *lingua fortis*—eh?"

There are men with whom it is as futile to argue as to reason with a drunkard; men whose logic is a sneer or a shout, whose axioms are adaptable to their line of argument, whose postulates are taken for granted, and whose conclusions consist, fittingly, in having the last word.

Mr. Macvee went off with a self-satisfied nod, strong in the assumption that Campion's death was a piece of bad luck for him, and, indeed, had lost him his case. Herriard, when he had congratulated and taken leave of Countess Alexia and her brother, left the Courts with his mind full of the situation's perplexity.

"We must not rest till Martindale's murderer is found," he said seriously to Mr. Bowyer, the solicitor, who, with his dapper managing clerk, was waiting for him in the corridor.

Old John Bowyer pursed his lips. He was eminent and highly respectable in his line, and his line was not the hunting down of criminals.

"You think the result inconclusive, Mr. Herriard?" asked Mr. Lee-Barker, the managing clerk, in a tone wherein professional deference to counsel's opinion hardly suggested that he had not one of his own.

"It must be inconclusive," Herriard replied emphatically. "We have won our case; so far Countess Alexia's reputation is cleared—legally. But she can hardly be quite satisfied with that."

"Quite so," observed Mr, Bowyer, in his habitual tone of non-committal.

"The villian of the piece must be unmasked," chimed in Mr. Lee-Barker pleasantly. He had had the working-up of the case, and was duly pleased with himself, without being in any violent hurry to pursue it farther. Sufficient unto the day, he told himself, is the verdict thereof; at least, when that verdict is favourable.

"Yes," pursued Herriard earnestly, "he must be found, and without loss of time."

Mr. Lee-Barker wondered why in the world a counsel of Herriard's standing and ability should be so keen outside his brief. A smart little man was Mr. Lee-Barker, with an enviable reputation in certain circles in Lincoln's Inn Fields and Surbiton, where he lived; and he believed in smartness as a paying quality, but not in Quixotism or works of supererogation. So he merely smiled, as deprecating zeal without instructions, and glanced at his chief with a suggestion of getting back to the office.

"Quite so," old Bowyer assented to Herriard's urgency: "but it is rather a matter for Scotland Yard, is it not, Mr. Herriard? "

"No doubt," Geoffrey answered. "But they ought to be kept up to the mark."

"We can scarcely move in the matter in the absence of instructions," put in Mr. Lee-Barker, tempering his impatience with the deference due to an eminent verdict-gaining counsel.

"No, I suppose not," Herriard returned, with a touch of impatience. "I will speak to Count von Rohnburg."

In his chambers Herriard threw off his wig and gown, and sat down to review the position; Alexia's position, which was now, he told himself with joy, his own. He was impatient to claim his reward; not, indeed, reward, since his victory was its own recompense, but the fulfilment of Alexia's implied promise, now that the dark cloud was driven away, that she would accept his love. But he could scarcely present himself before her just then; justifiable as his eagerness might be, it would not be decent. So that evening he must not go to Green Street; he must nurse his impatience: there was a busy night in the House of Commons, he would spend the hours there.

And Gastineau? The thought of his friend rose, for the first time during their acquaintance, uncomfortably to his mind. In the ordinary course he would have called at the hidden-away house in Mayfair first of all to report his victory. But to-day he could not bring himself to do it. He was conscious of a feeling, the extent of which he could not measure, which seemed to hold him back. There would be no pleasure, but distaste rather, in going to Gastineau's that afternoon. Why? His friend was unsympathetic, they were at issue about the case: he had won it practically without Gastineau's assistance, and he might feel a little awkwardly conscious on that score. The subject had been dropped between them; still, Herriard could hardly ignore the result, and had no wish to proclaim it. Gastineau's was the acuter mind, the stronger will; he had taught Herriard almost everything by which he had profited, and had imparted—that by force of genius—the knack of success. To the younger man their relations were, and probably would always be, those of master and pupil: the stronger will, the greater determination would always stand over the weaker. It was, perhaps, the sign of a certain weakness in Herriard's character that he shrank from meeting Gastineau that afternoon. A stronger man would have gone; Herriard kept telling himself that he ought not to make an exception on that of all days; and then he objected that he would not go because Gastineau had practically declared his belief in Alexia's guilt. It would have been better for him, perhaps, had he gone; however, a certain self-consciousness and resentment kept him away, and thereby he forged a weapon against himself.

In an unsettled state of mind he set himself to gather up and put away the papers connected with the case. Among them was a note he had taken of Campion's last words, his description of the man he had seen in the hansom. "I could swear," it ran, "that he was the same man I saw jumping from the window at Vaux House when Captain Martindale was killed. A dark man, with a pale face and piercing eyes, clean-shaven, and with straight black hair worn rather long. He looked like a foreigner."

So much Campion had told.

That was all. And the great question now remained, who was the man? The description was definite enough; nevertheless the police had come across no such person; they were completely at a loss now, for the suspect, so fully described, had absolutely vanished. Herriard feared that Scotland Yard might, when baffled, relax its efforts; to clear Countess Alexia, rather than to bring the unknown to justice, it was all-important to him that they should not.

He folded the note of Campion's statement into his pocket-book, and, on his way to the House, called upon the Chief Commissioner, whom he knew, and urged him to keep his men up to the mark in the hunt, and this, the official readily assured him, should be done.

Next day Herriard received an invitation to dine that evening at Green Street; he accepted it with elation, in happy anticipation of the sealing of his betrothal. On his way he called at Gastineau's.

Luckily there were several other matters to speak of before the awkward subject was touched upon. Herriard could not help noticing that his friend seemed strangely indifferent, giving points of advice and direction almost mechanically; over the whole consultation there was an air of unreality, of insincerity. This Herriard was inclined, somewhat, perhaps, against his acuter judgment, to put down to the other's state of health. Presently he asked Gastineau if he were suffering.

"Oh, no; not particularly," was the answer, given with an enigmatical smile, "I am as well as I can ever expect to be." Then, with a swift change, "Where are you dining to-night?"

"At Green Street, with the von Rohnburgs," Herriard answered, as casually as he could.

"Ah! So you won your case yesterday." The penetrating eyes were upon him with their snake-like glitter. Herriard saw, but did not meet them.

"Yes; as you predicted."

"Did I? Ah, yes. You see you did not lose much by Campion's disappearance from the scene."

"I am inclined to think we did," Herriard replied. "We just got our verdict, and I fancy that was all."

"H'm! " Gastineau shut his thin lips significantly. "Perhaps it is not to be wondered at. You did not bring me the news after Court yesterday."

Herriard turned now and faced the question which lay beneath the reproach. "For two reasons," he replied boldly. "One, I had to hurry off to the House, and was kept there. The Government were in a bad way, and the opportunity had to be made the most of."

"Quite right," Gastineau agreed. "And reason number two? Forgive my curiosity, but you mentioned a second."

"Reason number two," Herriard answered, with a short laugh, "was that I did not think you took a very devouring interest in the case."

"Why, my dear fellow? Why should you think that? On the contrary, I have taken great interest in it."

"I am afraid," said Herriard, "our interests were not the same." For an instant Gastineau looked at him searchingly, almost defiantly; then he laughed, as he rejoined, "My dear Geof, interest is an equivocal word. Beyond a professional attraction my only interest is your success and advancement. In this case I happen to hold a different opinion from yours, but surely that need not lessen my interest."

Herriard put back the thought, still it had risen to his mind that Gastineau's speech was not quite genuine. The words, graceful enough in themselves, relating to his interest in his pupil's advancement were glibly and perfunctorily spoken; an insincere formula, like a doctor's expression of sorrow at a patient's ill-health.

"Anyhow," he said, "I was not particularly elated at what might be considered a grudging verdict, and as I had no other news it did not seem very vital to hurry to bring you that."

"I see," Gastineau responded coldly, his manner plainly showing he hardly accepted the excuse as valid. "So you are going to dine with the Countess. I hope, my dear boy, you are not really becoming *épris* in that quarter."

"I dare say I am," Herriard replied quietly. "But then I hold a different opinion of her from yours."

Gastineau lay very still, and his face was white, deadly white. "You will regret it," he said, just moving his lips, in the absence or repression of all feeling; Herriard could not be sure which.

"I think not; I am sure I shall never regret it," he returned, with conviction.

"And I," Gastineau rejoined, in a stronger but still hard, passionless tone, "am as absolutely convinced that you will."

Herriard took a step toward him, holding out his hand "I had better say good-night. We do not seem likely to agree on this, and we must not quarrel."

Gastineau raised a listless hand. "Good-night," he responded, with a brooding significance. "You will go on your own way, then; but I have warned you."

A light of vague, horrible suspicion came into Herriard's eyes.

"Gastineau," he exclaimed, "do you know any real reason why I—I should take your warning?"

Gastineau had drawn his hand away sharply. "Nothing in the past," he answered, "nothing for certain, at any rate. My only reason is my absolute certainty that you will repent this step if you take it."

"Why should I?" Herriard demanded.

"That I cannot tell you. It will appear soon enough." there seemed almost a threat behind the words.

"I will take my chance of that," Herriard said, turning to go.

Gastineau's voice, sharp to peremptoriness, stayed him. "You are going to marry the Countess Alexia?"

"I think so."

"Think so? You are engaged?"

"Hardly. But I hope to be to-night." Then to soften the tone of their leave-taking he added, "I am sorry I cannot expect your good wishes."

Gastineau's face seemed set hard as a dead man's. "They could not be genuine," he replied in a cold, incisive tone. "The best wish would be that this folly may come to nothing. And I think it will."

Herriard saw the futility of saying more, so, with just a glance at the grey face, cruel in its rigidity, he left him.

CHAPTER XVI

NEARING A CRISIS

"MR. HERRIARD, you are not satisfied? "

"No, Countess; not altogether."

"What better result could you have hoped for? "

"None, so far as the trial went. But, for your sake, I shall never rest satisfied till the mystery of this case has been incontestably solved."

They were sitting together in the drawing-room; Count Prosper and an Austrian girl, who was on a visit to England and had completed the *partie carrée,* were at the piano in the room beyond.

"The obvious solution," Alexia said, "is the man whom that poor fellow, Campion, saw getting out of the window."

"Undoubtedly. But we must find him."

"Ah! That will be difficult? "

"Probably. The police are more or less at sea in a case like this where the man wanted is of high social standing, high enough, that is, to be a guest at Vaux House. I appreciate their difficulties, but do not mean to let them drop the search. I saw Sir Henry Ferrars about it yesterday."

"How good you are," she said, "to take all this trouble for me."

"For you? " He bent forward. "Could I do otherwise? Have I not the best of reasons? "

"I don't know," she replied, perhaps because she had to say something.

"You might know if you cared, Countess," he said in a low voice. "And you might tell me. I have been happy in the thought of your promise."

"My promise? How well Fräulein von Hochstadt plays."

"I cannot hear her," he replied, in a passionate whisper, "when I have your voice to listen to."

Alexia laughed. Her implied promise and her own happiness disarmed her. She could but temporize with the surrender which was not to be refused.

"My voice? You will shame me into silence if it prevents your listening to the loveliest thing Tchaikovsky ever wrote."

"There are," he returned, "times when even the genius of music must go unheeded."

"In competition with the human voice? "

"Not the voice alone, but the words we long for the voice to speak. Alexia," he took her hand, and to his joy she let it rest in his, "has the time come? "

"The golden day, when the cloud should have passed over and I be a free woman? Yes; thanks to you, it has come."

"And for me? "

Her silence was of consent, not doubt; at its end she softly raised her eyes till they met his, and in that glance, a beam that seemed to hold an eternity of happiness, he saw that he was loved. The enchaining melody of the great Russian master rose and thrilled under the passionate touch of the girl at the piano; it mingled with the perfume of Alexia's hair, as Herriard bent over her and pressed his lips to her cheek. It was but a snatched kiss, for they were half in sight of the other two, but it was not to be resisted.

Alexia put up her hand in half-earnest warning. "Mr. Herriard! Geoffrey! You will be seen. Will you never learn to be opportune? "

"Never with you, darling," he answered.

"I think you will," she rejoined, with a look and a smile which tempted him to throw prudence to the winds. "I must teach you."

So he sat by her more circumspectly, engrossed in lovers' talk. Sometimes the thought of his shame, of his false position, would seem to force itself between him and his love, there, where no shame should exist, but the delight of the present hour stifled each pang of self-reproach as soon as it was born within him. In the intoxication of his love what mind could he have for sober scruples? In that hour of joy it was the delight of the present and future that held him; his past life with its frown could but be disregarded. Looking at the rare woman by his side, enthralled by the spell of her beauty, above all, by the charm of her irresistibly fascinating personality, he was not likely to allow the chilling spectre of his deceit to stand between them. All he could do was to look at his love and marvel at his good fortune.

"I cannot understand," he said, with more candour than tact, following out the thought that was uppermost in his mind, "how this good fortune has been reserved for me."

She glanced at him with a little smiling criticism of his remark.

"Is it worth while enquiring too curiously into that? " she returned. "Perhaps the good fortune—I take your expression—has been reserved for the man who should deserve it."

"I can never," he replied deprecatingly, "do more than try to be worthy of it. "But," he continued, "I was thinking, not of myself, but of the many men who must have been in love with you."

She laughed. "A very complimentary way, sir, of alluding to the delicate subject of my age."

"No, no," he protested. "Alexia, we are neither of us children——"

"And our ages are quite suitable," she bantered.

"Dearest," he laid his hand on her arm with a caressing clasp of restraint, "you know I am not alluding to age."

"I suppose," she went on, still fencing, "you have now a right to know mine; honestly, eight-and-twenty."

"That gives," he said, "at least eight years of admirers."

She gave a little sigh, and he thought he understood why she had trifled with his question. "Ah, yes."

"And, tell me, Alexia, you have never returned the love of one of them—till now? "

She gave a little shrug. "Never, I suppose, till now."

The last two words were almost whispered, but he caught their thrill.

"My dear Geoffrey," she continued, changing her tone, "you know the world, and that there are no exact rules for judging men, let alone women. With some of us love is a very ordinary and regularly recurring episode; a love-affair is like a new gown, an agreeable anticipation in the progress of its making, a shallow joy when it is new and novel, a waning interest as it wears out, and at last just kept on till its successor is ready. To others," she sank her voice, "love is fate."

He took her hand. "Ours has come at last. May it be a happy one. But I should have thought that love, if not fate, had come to you before."

Alexia smiled. "Why should you think so? Is it inconceivable that a woman should not fall in love before she is—twenty-eight?"

"With you," he answered, "it is almost incredible. Still I did not draw my conclusions from that, but rather from your manner when I asked the question."

"My manner? Was it betraying?"

"It seemed to suggest an *arrière penseé*."

She laughed "Of earlier blighted affections. Hardly complimentary to you. No," she added, more seriously, "I have never been in love—till now."

"Then your sigh was the outcome of another regret; not, I hope, that love—and fate—had overtaken you at last?"

"No, Geoffrey, not that. You pay us both a poor compliment." She was speaking half dreamily, and her voice seemed to take its tone from and blend with the subdued melody of the andantino that came from the inner room. "What there may be to regret comes from others, from outside."

"From men who have loved you?"

She made an inclination of assent.

"A man little thinks how painful, how hateful his persistence is to a woman who cannot care for him."

"Men are most selfish in love," Herriard said.

"Selfish and unreasonable," she supplemented; "some, at least. They look upon a woman as a besieged town, which, refusing to surrender, must be taken by assault or battered to destruction."

She spoke so feelingly that the indignant blood surged in Herriard's veins. "Alexia, you have been persecuted? Tell me: you must."

"It is needless," she replied, "since it is all over now."

"Ah, you mean that man, Martindale? He——"

She shook her head. "No; not poor Captain Martindale. He was tiresome, and, perhaps, something worse. But women had spoilt him and made him what I knew him."

"Alexia," he urged, in the ardor of his new relationship. "Tell me. I hate to think that you have suffered at a man's hands; I must know."

"It is not worth while," she replied, with a little reminiscent shudder. "It is nothing more than the persecution of a man who had more determination than chivalry. But he is dead."

"Lately dead?"

"No; some years ago."

"Tell me his name."

"You would know it. He was a distinguished member of your profession." She paused, as though debating with herself whether she should tell more.

"Did you ever know," she asked at length, "did you ever know Paul Gastineau?"

Simultaneously with the pronouncing of the name, by a curious, but not uncommon prescience, the image of Gastineau had started up in Herriard's mind, and he had known intuitively that no other name would be spoken.

Paul Gastineau! He! That he of all men should have been in love with her. And he had persecuted her, evidently with such determination as to leave a very bitter memory, enough to compel a shudder when it came to her mind. It was all plain now. Gastineau's spite was still keenly alive; love had turned to hate. It was hate. Herriard knew it now, that had gleamed in Gastineau's eyes when they had spoken of Alexia. In the same instant a great feeling of relief, of joy almost, came to Herriard in the knowledge that the other man's judgment of the case had been wilfully false. Not another doubt of Alexia's innocence could ever cross his mind now that he had found the opinion of the acuter brain was warped and worthless, a mere slander.

But what of the man who, for his own vindictive purpose, had tried to poison his mind against the woman he loved? Even across that dark thought there streamed a ray of light. Their connection, the equivocal nature of which had of late galled him, must now be severed. The reason, the excuse was apt: and he, Geoffrey Herriard, would be a free man again, to stand or fall by his own abilities. That his marriage would make imperative; after this disclosure the break would be less painful; by it he would be absolved from ingratitude towards the man who had chosen to exploit his fortunes.

"He is dead," Alexia had said, with a suggestion of relief; and Paul Gastineau was indeed dead to all the world save himself and Geoffrey Herriard. Could he come to life again—Herriard did not care to imagine the contingency except on its impossible side. It seemed heartlessly, cruelly ungrateful, but he could not help a feeling of subdued satisfaction at the thought that Dr. Hallamar the one man in Europe who might have cured him, had declared his case hopeless.

All this passed swiftly through Herriard's mind as he sat startled into the silence of intense, almost bewildering thought.

"Geoffrey, what are you thinking of?"

The words, spoken with laughing concern, roused him to see Alexia's grey eyes fixed on him with perhaps a suspicion of anxiety beneath the look of enquiry.

"I was wondering," he answered, "what manner of man it could be who had the spite to persecute you, dearest."

The animation seemed to fade from her face again. "You may wonder," she replied. "The man was well known, although, I dare say, few who knew him guessed what lay beneath the surface of his character. I would rather you asked some one else than me to describe him, if you are curious to revive a memory which were better left to rest."

The words seemed to stab Herriard. Who in the world knew Gastineau better than he? Like accusing spirits there now rose to his mind the quasi dead fighter's vindictive attacks on men he had hated and envied, of which he, Geoffrey Herriard, poor tool, had been the mouthpiece; the venomous stinging thrusts he had been taught to deliver so deftly; the terrible, transcendent irony and sarcasm into which he had been coached with such untiring pains. Why should a man who had, by a strange combination of accident and choice, taken leave of the world, why should he retain and revel in all this eager vindictiveness, except that his soul was black as sin? Gastineau was a very Iago; a malicious spirit that could not rest under the idea of denial or disappointment, but must work for the compensating delight of other men's discomfiture.

It was terrible; more terrible still, it seemed, in that atmosphere of love and nobleness, where vice looked by contrast the more hideous; and he, Geoffrey Herriard, sitting there, with that pure hand in his, breathing the very air of love and chivalrous devotion, had been, and, indeed, was still, the partner, the abettor of this son of evil. The very idea maddened him. He recalled the look of Gastineau's face as he had last seen it that evening; grey, set with hate and, so far, impotent vindictiveness. He did not like to contemplate the picture, and, to veil it, he turned to Alexia with the eagerness of a man escaping from a disquieting thought.

But she was the first to break the silence. "Does your fate sadden you? " she asked, with a little uncertain smile.

"My fate? No; certainly not my future," he answered.

"At least it makes you silent. You need not say you were listening to the music," she added banteringly, "for I don't believe you heard a note of it."

Her woman's instinct was right; happily, he thought, there were limits to it. What if she could have divined all his thoughts just then!

"Forgive me, darling," he replied. "What you told me led my thoughts to ramble among dark ways. It is as well to explore, and then have done with them for ever. Now I am in the sunshine again."

The music had come to an end. Count Prosper and the player joined them.

"I can honestly say I never enjoyed music so much before," Herriard said, in the midst of their thanks. "Did you, Countess? " he asked meaningly, and Alexia was forced to say, "Never."

Soon the Austrian girl took her leave. When Count

Prosper returned from seeing her to her carriage, he was full of enthusiasm over her performance. "I never heard playing that gave me as much delight," he said, with a touch of foreign exuberance.

"I never shall," Herriard observed quietly.

Prosper gave him an enquiring glance; Herriard looked at Alexia and laughed. "May I explain?" he asked.

Prosper laughed too, a little mystified. "Please do."

"Fräulein von Hochstadt's playing had an added delight for me," Herriard said, his laugh giving way to a little tremor of feeling, "since under cover of the music Countess Alexia did me the honour to promise to be my wife."

"Ah!" It seemed not altogether unexpected by her brother, and Herriard was glad to see no opposition in his eyes. "So!" He bowed in acknowledgment of the news with Austrian courtliness.

"My sister's happiness is mine. Alix," he took her hands in his, then kissed her on both cheeks, "I wish you joy." He turned to Geoffrey. "Herriard, you have my warmest wishes, and as the best of sisters should be the best of wives, I give them with all confidence." He shook his hands warmly, and so it was settled.

As the hour was yet early, Herriard stayed for a while longer, and Alexia kept them company in the smoking-room. There they talked happily, laughing over plans for the future. Alexia told her brother he would have to find a wife now that she would be leaving him.

"Ah," he objected, "I have some work to do first. I must rise a little higher in my profession before that comes to pass."

"You are not likely to make an unfortunate choice, Count," Herriard said, "and therefore need not pay women a bad compliment. With a wife such as my good fortune has given me I anticipate no drawback in my profession."

Prosper smiled. "When I have risen as high in my service as you have in yours, my dear fellow, it will be time for me to think about matrimony."

Herriard gave a deprecating head-shake. "I have much to do yet," he said, with more conviction than they gave him credit for, as he thought how he had now to work and fight alone. "To an ambitious man, everything."

Prosper laughed again. "I am glad to see that you are modest as well as ambitious. All the same, my dear Herriard, it is generally admitted that you have won for yourself a most enviable and honourable position."

The word honourable grated on Herriard's sense of the fitting. "No! no!" he protested, with the impulsive vehemence of awakened shame.

But the Count set himself to maintain the point. "A man," he argued, "can hardly gauge his own position. I go about much, my dear Geoffrey, and hear what is said of your success. Why, only this afternoon at the Travellers, Josselyn, who you will allow knows something of his profession and yours, was saying that you had now quite taken the place, vacant since his death, of one of the most successful advocates of our generation, Paul Gastineau."

At the name, Herriard and Alexia's eyes met with such significance that Prosper could not but notice it.

"Why, what is it? What have I said?" he demanded, glancing from one to the other.

"Nothing," his sister answered quickly. "It is curious that we happened to mention Mr. Gastineau's name a little while ago."

"You are supposed to be like him in Court, Herriard," Prosper went on. "But with more scrupulousness and less venom." He laughed. "That 's what the critics say. I don't know how far it is a compliment. I never heard Gastineau in Court; but I dare say you know better than I, his reputation was not quite such as a very honourable man would envy. He went in to win at any price, did n't he? and not always to fight fair, either in law or politics, so they say."

"I have heard that," Herriard said, thinking of what Alexia had told him.

"But he was successful," Count Prosper continued in the lazy discussion of a fact which a cigar induces; "the world is dazzled by success, and in its eagerness to applaud does not stop to ask how the success has been won."

"Only a few men do that," Alexia observed, "and their criticism goes for little."

"Yes," Herriard agreed, "in the judgment of men's characters, of successful men, at any rate, it is the few who are right, the mob who are wrong. But the mob counts."

"Talking of that man Gastineau," Count Prosper said casually, "have you heard the weird story that he has been seen about town?"

"Paul Gastineau?" Herriard exclaimed. "Impossible!" He glanced at Alexia. Her eyes were on her brother with a look of mingled apprehension and incredulity.

"Yes," Prosper went on, as he blew out a long puff of smoke, "it is rather startling, considering that the fellow was killed in that railway accident near Cordova some years ago. But the man—I have heard, but forget who, anyhow a man who knew him well—swears he saw him one evening lately."

There was a silence; for a few moments neither of the other two could speak.

"Or his ghost," Prosper added presently, puffing lazily at his cigar.

"Or some one very like him," Alexia suggested, her eyes full of an uneasy speculation.

"That," said Prosper easily, unconscious of the feeling his announcement had excited, "is probably the explanation. I was once absolutely deceived myself in that way. Stopped my own cousin in the street to find after a few words that it was not he at all, but a total stranger. And the curious part of it was that the man told me I was exactly like some one he knew. So we were both deceived."

"It shows," Herriard spoke mechanically, "that these personal resemblances are common enough."

"Oh, yes," Prosper laughed, "there are only a certain number of human moulds, and we are turned out of one or another of them with slight variations in the setting and the finish."

"Yes," Alexia said with an effort, speaking more to herself than to the others, "that can be the only explanation of a man who was killed years ago in Spain, being seen walking the London streets to-day."

If her tone seemed to dismiss the strange report as easily accounted for, there was in her face a look which Herriard did not like to see.

CHAPTER XVII

AMAZEMENT

WHEN he left Green Street that night Herriard had become possessed of a conviction, vague yet positive, that the events of his life were moving swiftly towards a crisis. How near that crisis was and what shape it was about to take he little imagined. The problems before him were so acute and so perplexing that it was many hours before his brain, wearied with the struggle, let him sleep. The joy of his love, of his betrothal, was so mingled and interwoven with dark and troublesome thoughts, that only intermittently could he indulge it. One thing was certain. He must break with Gastineau. That disingenuous partnership could not continue. Apart from all idea of the fraud, for to live on the credit and success derived from another man's brains now insistently presented itself to him as nothing less, it was now imperative that he should be his own master. The fortune to which he was giving a hostage must be an honest one, of that he was determined.

How Gastineau would take the question of their severance he could not be sure. The man was a contradiction, and his character forbade the idea of accurate forecast as to his actions. Anyhow the resolve had to be mooted and its reception faced, unpleasant task though it were, and the more so that on the surface it smacked of ingratitude.

That it should have been Gastineau of all men who had forced his unwelcome attentions upon Countess Alexia was a most deplorable coincidence, and with the hateful complications it suggested there mingled the harassing thought of the further deceit his knowledge of Gastineau's existence forced upon him. There, however, he had the satisfactory excuse that his withholding of the fact would be for Alexia's peace of mind; he might honourably conceal his knowledge till the disclosure of the secret was likely to have no ill effect; and indeed he was bound to secrecy by his solemn promise to Gastineau.

He fell to thinking of the man's character, analyzing it by the light of what he had just heard, and told himself he could well imagine how unchivalrously ruthless Gastineau could be, how pitilessly he would work his resolve in a matter where his feelings were strongly touched. He could be, as Herriard had reason to know, tenaciously vindictive, malignant to a degree abnormal in human nature. Petty slights and discomfitures of the past were remembered and brought up again with a view to reprisal, for which, as has been seen, Herriard was the, often unwilling, instrument. He had, however, felt himself bound to fight Gastineau's posthumous battles, to be the secret champion of the man who had so splendidly fulfilled his half of the contract, and indeed Gastineau, when arming his pupil for the conflicts, had always made very plausible excuses for the stinging aggressiveness of the attacks he was planning, and had a pleasant way of ornamenting with his wit what, divested of flourishes, amounted to little more than gratuitous bullying. That wit of his was the Matador's cloak with which he covered the deadly sword of his invective. Happily for his own reputation Herriard, being a man of a character very different from his mentor's, had been wont by a certain innate distinction and refinement of touch to soften the ugliness of the spite which underlay Gastineau's methods and expressions. Still the animus was no less real to him, and in the present crisis was tinged by the disturbing consideration of what that resolute mind might be capable of working against his happiness and Alexia's.

True, Gastineau in his present condition was to all intents powerless; but could a man with a brain so acute, so scheming, so restless, ever with safety be considered powerless for evil? Was not that extraordinary partnership, which had been established between them immediately Gastineau found he was to live, proof of what strange scheming he was capable? The whole situation was terribly disquieting, and Herriard found himself feverishly anxious for its solution.

Once or twice the strange report of Gastineau's having been seen about and recognized came to his mind. It was the more curious to him in its coincidence with the real fact of the man's being alive; but on the whole he attached little importance to it, being convinced it was merely a case of mistaken identity. There were plenty of stupid people walking the streets of London, all ready for a mystification; and, as Count Prosper had said, singular cases of resemblance were the experience of nearly every one. So Herriard let that pass without adding more than a momentary addition to his uneasiness.

The next day was a busy one for him in the Courts, and when they rose he had to hurry down to the House on an urgent whip to wait for an important division which promised to be very close. It was an annoying delay, seeing that he had made other plans for that afternoon. He naturally was eager to be with Alexia again, to make amends for the snatched wooing of the previous night; then there was Gastineau to see and the question of their severance to be determined.

But it was not until evening that Herriard found himself free to leave the House. It was then, being about the dinner hour, too late or too early to call on Alexia, so he drove to the outskirts of Mayfair, and then, as was his wont, dismissing the cab, walked to Gastineau's.

His friend greeted him without a sign of the previous night's animosity. It was with a smile only just tinged with cynicism that Gastineau inquired as to the result of his wooing.

"Well, Geof, is it settled? "

Herriard nodded. "I am sorry not to look for your congratulations, but I am accepted."

Except by a curious contraction of the eyes, a tightening, as it were, of the muscles that govern the facial play, Gastineau's face betrayed no feeling.

"You need not be so stand-offish about it, Geof," he observed with a laugh. "It is extraordinary how, in affairs of the heart, men will resent all advice and comment on the most important event in their lives, even from their best friends. Now, please don't get angry," for Herriard had made an impatient movement; "do remember that, if I am a hopeless cripple, I can at least see as far into an affair of this sort, and a complex affair it is, as yourself. I have given you my advice, unfortunately it had to be unacceptable, and you have rejected it, *voilà tout.*"

"It sounded yesterday," Herriard said, with a feeling of distaste at the reason which he knew underlay the other's action, "less like advice than a threat."

"A threat? " Gastineau drew back one side of his mouth in a patronizing smile of protest. "My dear fellow, you must be getting sensitive over this unfortunate affair. How should I threaten you? "

The wording of the question was vague, perhaps intentionally so. "That I cannot say," Herriard returned shortly, still ruffled and not caring to thrash out the matter.

"No, I should think not," Gastineau rejoined, with a little scornful laugh. "Don't let us waste our time in talking nonsense. It is puerile. Now, tell me about your cases to-day."

He dismissed and changed the subject with the peremptoriness of a schoolmaster dealing with a foolish pupil. Herriard rather welcomed the tone; it would facilitate the mooting of the important question he was there to settle.

He spoke shortly of the day's cases: they had not been of great importance or complexity, and there was no reason for dwelling on them. Then their talk turned on the afternoon's debate in the House. Gastineau questioned him minutely, as was sometimes his wont, about the speeches and the general conduct of the debate.

"Why on earth did n't you speak? " he asked presently. There was a certain tartness in the tone of the question which to-day Herriard rather resented.

"I? " he replied. "I had nothing to say. I was not posted on the facts. Besides, they did not want me to get up."

"Did not want you!" Gastineau echoed impatiently. "What had that to do with it? Your business," he went on testily, "is to speak when it suits you, not when the Whips please. And as to not being posted in the facts, surely you could have gathered them from the opening speeches. The ineffable Congreve appears to have been in a particularly tight corner; there was your chance of giving the blatant ass a good kicking. But you missed it," he added, in a tone of disgust.

"Congreve got it pretty hot from all sides, as it was."

Gastineau made an exclamation of impatience. "Do you think he cared for that sort of basting? The hide of the superior person is thicker than any donkey's. You must thrust through it and sting; mere drubbing is of no use. Who went for him?"

"Franklin and Hayland more particularly."

"Pooh!" Gastineau returned contemptuously. "Do you think Congreve, who, after all, has some knowledge of men, cares for either of those? Poor old Franklin with his academical criticisms, and Hayland who is a snob at heart and quite ready to black Congreve's boots to show that his antagonism is merely of party. And you, with this splendid opportunity to your hand, were content to leave Congreve's trouncing to those feeble exponents of the art of taking the shine out of aristocratic frauds and weaklings. Upon my word, Geoffrey Herriard, I begin to despair of you."

The opening for which Herriard was waiting had presented itself.

"In that case," he returned quietly, "it would be better that our partnership should end."

Gastineau shot a searching glance at him. "You think so?"

His fathoming, and yet unfathomable, manner was disconcerting, but Herriard stood to his point. "We seem to have been out of agreement lately," he said.

"In one matter."

"A very important one—to me, at least."

Gastineau gave a little nod, and then a sneering smile spread over his pale face. "You mean you feel you can run alone," he suggested, "that you can get on without me? "

The tone was so cutting that it forced Herriard to reply warmly. "That is very far from being the reason. I am sorry that you should impute such a motive to me."

Gastineau laughed, still sneering. "I don't know that I should blame you," he said. "When a man feels his feet, the arm that has kept him up in deep water becomes an encumbrance."

"You are utterly mistaken in the motive of my suggestion," Herriard protested. "You have no cause to charge me with such rank ingratitude as that would be. The fact that I owe every step of my position to you makes me very unwilling to propose that we should work together no longer. Yet for some time past I have felt that our partnership must come to an end."

"I can hardly offer any effective objection," Gastineau replied, still with the suggestion of a little quiet scorn. "I am in your hands." There was a subtle touch of irony in the words. "But even now you have not given me any adequate reason for the step, and it seems to me that I have at least a moral right to expect one."

The whole reason could scarcely be given, and the half seemed absurdly weak and inadequate. Still Herriard tried to make the most of it. "The reason," he answered, "is surely obvious. Our difference of opinion respecting the woman who is to be my wife."

Gastineau gave a shrug and a laugh. "May difference of opinion—— You are taking the expression of mine very seriously, my dear Geof."

"Can I do otherwise?"

"You might stop short at Quixotism."

"Quixotism!" Herriard echoed. "How can we work together on the old footing with my knowledge that in your eyes my wife is a perjured murderess?"

Gastineau smiled deprecatingly. "Scarcely so bad as that."

"Something very like it. Your opinion is that the Countess Alexia killed Martindale; venially, if not with malice aforethought; and has denied on oath all knowledge of how he came by his death."

Contrary, perhaps, to Herriard's expectation, Gastineau made no attempt to deny or even soften the expression of his judgment. "And so," he said, with a reversion to his more languid manner, "you think that our eventful connection should come to an end?"

"I think it must," Herriard answered, glad to bring the disagreeable subject to finality.

"Very well." Then, with his peculiar smile, "But not to-day. You are not married yet. Who knows what may not happen before the wedding-day to modify my disturbing opinion? The real culprit may turn up. I hope you are searching for him; for, if I may say so without adding to my offence, the late verdict leaves something to be desired."

"I know that," Herriard assented gloomily.

Gastineau nodded to emphasize the necessity.

"Well," he proceeded, "before the two halves of this pair of shears are unscrewed we may as well make one or two final cuts with them. I think we might get Mr. Congreve's aquiline nose between them while they are yet in working condition. It is a pity you let him off to-day when he was delivered into your hand. But I suppose the *affaire* Rohnburg was responsible for that too. My dear Geoffrey, have n't I told you that a man who would rise must keep his mind in divisions, and never allot more room than one of them to any one object? He must never allow the whole working to be thrown out of gear because one engine breaks down. Or, like a ship fitted with water-tight compartments, if one is pierced and flooded, his mind must still be buoyant and steerable. Yours seems now to be water-logged. Don't be offended. I am going to inflict you with my maxims up to the end."

Presently they parted: to all appearances not much worse friends than ever. Herriard promised to come again next day, and went off to call at Green Street. He had opened the street door when it occurred to him that it would be well for him to write a note of explanation to leave for Alexia in case he should not find her at home. Accordingly he shut the door again, and went into a little study on the ground floor which he had sometimes used for writing, when, perhaps, Gastineau had seemed tired, and he had not cared to bore him by staying in his room too long.

This room—it is as well to describe its situation in view of what happened—was approached through an arch, filled with a portière, from another and larger apartment which was fitted as a smoking-room, for, although Gastineau could have had little hope of using it himself, it was one of his fads and fancies to have his house perfectly appointed as a bachelor's residence.

Herriard had passed into the inner room and sat down at the writing table, switching on a shaded electric lamp, for dusk had begun to fall and that room was always gloomy, shut in as it was and darkened by stained glass windows and sombre bookcases.

The short note was soon written. Herriard closed the envelope, looked at his watch, and then extinguished the lamp. It was somewhat earlier than he thought; he did not care to present himself at Green Street till dinner was well over. It would be as well to wait ten minutes longer. So he sat back in the writing chair and fell to reviewing his late interview with the man upstairs. It was an unspeakable relief to him that he had got over the awkward question, and had done so with as little unpleasantness as could have been expected. The disagreeable thought which overlay the whole delicate business was Gastineau's disingenuous slander of Alexia. Had it been an honest expression of suspicion and doubt it would have been galling enough: being what it was, the outcome of spite, it had the natural effect of turning Herriard's feelings of friendship and gratitude almost to loathing. Well, he thought, the separation is in train now; its completion is but a matter of days, or, at most, weeks. And then? He fell to wondering what Gastineau's life would be. Would he find another friend, another partner? Very likely he would get hold of a second apt pupil and run him against his first. Would the new partner be primed to attack him as he himself had been forced to attack Congreve and other *bêtes noires* of Gastineau? Well, it could not be helped; let him be thankful that the questionable alliance had come to an end.

Then he thought how lonely Gastineau would be when his own daily visits were over: and he felt sorry, even for him, even for that restless, malicious spirit, cruelly, yet perhaps happily, fettered, yet so keen on working off his venom through the channel of another man's self-interest. Could he be really sorry for him after what he had heard? Was not the man a danger? Had it not been for the best——

Suddenly the current of his thoughts was arrested, he could scarcely tell why. A moving presence near him, or an imperfectly realized sound, was responsible for the effect. Anyhow, Herriard straightened himself into a posture of attention and sat listening. The servant, Hencher, was out; Gastineau had told him that he should be alone in the house for some hours that evening. And yet here was—yes, the door stood open and he could have sworn that he had heard some one moving outside the room. He stood up and turned, waiting. Through the opening of the curtained archway he could see into the room beyond; the blind was not drawn down, and the light of a street lamp fell obliquely across the room. It was this dull stream of light that Herriard was watching; for an instant it had been intercepted as a dark shadow fell across it, then it streamed uninterruptedly again. Some one, something, was moving beyond the curtains; three steps would solve the mystery. For a moment Herriard hesitated; then he made a quick step forward. Only one. For beyond the screen of the portière the figure of a man appeared, moving quickly across the room until it was again hidden by the curtain on the other side.

A man. Who was it? The back of the figure had been turned to him, and the light which shone into the room fell low, leaving the head in darkness. The passing of the figure had not broken the dead silence; was it really a human being, or an hallucination seen by Herriard's excited brain, or—a supernatural visitation? These three possibilities flashed through Herriard's mind as he stood dumbfounded for the moment. He held his breath to listen more acutely. A slight sound came from the outer room, a sound as of some small object being moved or laid down, and Herriard told himself that the apparition was scarcely supernatural. Then, before the watcher could further resolve the question, the open space was darkened again, and the mysterious figure stood between him and the light. Herriard was about to move forward, when the impulse changed, and involuntarily he drew back until he was half hidden by the angle of a bookcase by which he stood. A strange sensation which he could not define seemed to hold him there, without the power or the will to move, staring intently at the man's figure which now seemed to be coming towards him.

Breathlessly, Herriard waited till the mysterious visitor should have advanced so far out of the obscurity that his face could be seen. In another moment the revelation came.

The man had approached the opening between the rooms; his hand was on the curtain; he pulled it aside a little, as though glancing into the study. As he turned his face, the light just brought it into clear visibility. With a shock the truth came to Herriard. The man before him was Gastineau.

CHAPTER XVIII

RESURRECTION

HERRIARD could not have told how long the tense situation lasted. Nor could he be sure whether Gastineau saw him or not. The shock of the astounding sight seemed to have deprived him of all power of speech as well as of movement. For there was something supernaturally mysterious about it, heightened by the certain occult power of will, indefinable and not to be gauged, which had always suggested itself beneath Gastineau's more obvious characteristics. At the same time Herriard's mind was alert enough, with the abnormal activity of a dreamer's. He wondered why Gastineau did not speak; then whether those sharp eyes could fail to see him; all the time searching helplessly for a solution of the miracle of his being there on his feet. As in a dream, the flash of time was lengthened out, in reality Gastineau's look into the room lasted but two or three seconds. At length Herriard, feeling sure he must be seen, and desperate to snap the intolerable tension, made an effort to speak. But before his dry tongue could utter a sound, Gastineau turned away and disappeared.

With that, the rigidity that held him under a spell of astonishment approaching to horror gradually relaxed; the power of practical speculation returned. Was it indeed Gastineau whom he had seen? He went forward a few steps into the centre of the room, and listened.

Not a sound broke the stillness. Then from the street came that of a whistled tune. It dissipated instantly the atmosphere of the supernatural which seemed to fill the house. Herriard was ashamed to acknowledge the courage which that touch of outside, common-place life put into him. He passed boldly now into the outer room beyond; it was empty. He went quickly out into the hall; no one was to be seen, no movement to be heard. Had it been really Gastineau? He was now inclined to put the appearance down to an hallucination; that could be plausibly accounted for in the present perturbed state of his mind; the alternative was beyond the bounds of possibility. At least it would be easy to make sure.

Herriard ran quickly upstairs, laughing a little uncomfortably at the absurd want of balance his brain had shown. Next moment the shock and tremor returned. For, in front of him, as he reached the wide landing, the door of Gastineau's room stood wide open. He knew that he had shut it when he left the room twenty minutes before. Who could have opened it if there were no human being in the house but Gastineau and himself? Who but one?

Then he laughed. Of course Hencher had returned earlier than was expected, and had gone into his master's room, leaving the door open. Herriard crossed to the room and went in. Gastineau was not there; his couch was empty.

For some time Herriard stood staring at his friend's accustomed place stupidly, dumbfoundedly, unable all at once to realize all the empty room meant. Then it came to him, vaguely, but blurred as to the details, and, following closely on that, a certain horror. The man's real character seemed to have been revealed to him suddenly; he had known him intimately for years without learning as much about him and his nature as the last twenty-four hours had taught him. And now, with the revelation of the depths—perhaps not yet the lowest—of the man's character and capabilities, had come the startling knowledge that the chains which had fettered that evil spirit in the flesh had been struck off. Gastineau, then, was no longer a prisoner, but a free man, free to work his will upon those who opposed him, who stood in his way.

But the real significance of the discovery came from the secrecy with which the change had been kept from him. Half an hour ago Gastineau had been lying on that couch in the manner of a hopeless paralytic; the horror of that living lie was appalling to think of. Herriard had often of late applied that epithet to himself: here was the wheel within the wheel; the deceiver himself hoodwinked; the lower depth, undreamt of, in what he had come to think the lowest.

All this passed swiftly through his mind as soon as he could bring himself to realize it; then came a more practical consideration, Gastineau must not find him there; must not know of his discovery of the secret. Could he get out of the house, unseen, unheard? In an access of consternation he stole to the door. As his hand touched it, it was pushed open from without and he fell back with a half cry as Gastineau stood before him.

The face he encountered was dark with vicious ill-humour; but, if he was more startled than Herriard by the rencontre, he, with his stronger nerves, showed it less. The expression of angry surprise changed into a sneering, evil laugh of annoyance, the laugh of a schemer who is found out.

It was characteristic of him that he waited for Herriard to speak. The explanation was due not from, but to him.

"Gastineau, you are well, you are cured?" There was contempt now in the laugh with which the other walked past him into the room.

Herriard turned and faced him. "Gastineau," he said, wondering apprehensively what was to come, "why did you not tell me?"

Gastineau turned too; the look of surprised annoyance had given way to a smile which was not exactly reassuring. "Yes," he replied coolly; "I have recovered the use of my limbs—no thanks to you."

The light tone in which the last words were spoken did not disguise their intentional significance. To Herriard they were obscure, and he let them pass.

"But, Gastineau, why this secrecy?"

The other man's mouth was drawn to one side in a sneer. "Could you expect anything else?" he returned.

"Surely," Herriard answered quite frankly. "I don't know whether you kept it secret to give me a pleasant surprise," he added, with a touch of irony.

"A pleasant surprise!" Gastineau repeated the words with an incredulous drawl.

"You might have known how rejoiced I should be at your recovery."

Gastineau laughed unpleasantly. "You know how wrong-headed I am apt to be. I might have doubted even your satisfaction."

Herriard looked at him in wonder at the line he was taking. "You do me less than justice," he protested.

"Do I? " the other replied meaningly. "Well, perhaps I may be excused for imagining you would just as soon that things remained as they were. It is scarcely worth discussing."

"I think it is," Herriard maintained.

"Oh, no," Gastineau denied with decision. "I am ready to accept your assurance that you are pleased at my recovery," he continued, in an off-hand tone. His manner of almost vicious irritation had disappeared. It was now easy and, but for a lurking suspicion of spite, almost pleasant.

"Of course I am," Herriard assured him, with a show of greater conviction than perhaps he felt. "Tell me how it has come to pass? "

Gastineau took out a cigarette and lighted it. "There is nothing much to tell; I have, as you know, a strong constitution and a still stronger will. First of all, let me tell you, since you have found out what it amused me to keep secret—by the way, I thought you left the house some time ago? " He spoke sharply, as though accusing Herriard of a trick.

"I was half out of the house," he hastened to explain, "but came back to write a note. I was in the study when you came downstairs, and could not believe my eyes when I saw you."

"And came up here to see whether I was my own ghost or not? " Gastineau supplemented with his quick perceptiveness. Herriard nodded. "Well, there is no harm done, except, perhaps, so far as my own plan of life may be affected. Now, although the conditions are changed, I wish my being alive to be kept as close a secret as ever."

"Of course," Herriard responded. "You may trust me not to breathe a hint of it."

"To any one? "

"To any one."

"No even to your *fiancée*, Countess Alexia? "

"No; not even to her." To Alexia least of all, he thought.

Gastineau smoked in silence for a few seconds, inhaling the smoke slowly, as though formulating a plan of explanation. "I am like a man newly risen from the dead;" he spoke deliberately with a curious tenseness; "or rather, like one born in manhood instead of infancy. Life has come upon me so suddenly, so unexpectedly, that I am bewildered. I cannot look ahead yet, cannot order my existence."

"I can understand that," Herriard commented.

"Whether to go back to the old life," Gastineau continued musingly, yet characteristically alert; "or to start an entirely new one, to carve out a fresh career; to conquer another world, rather than to throw myself again into the old arena with its sordid dust, its contemptible applause? That is the question," he raised his tone, "to go back to the wrangling, the quibbling, the stench of the Courts, the knocking of sense into and prejudice out of the butchers' skulls of twelve greasy tradesmen, the blunting of one's wits against the Judge's shield of complacent stupidity and shortsightedness, the disgusting obligation to win a ruffian's or a sharper's fight against a decent fellow; to be jostled all day by glib, shabby lawyers' clerks, reeking of cheap cigarettes and bristling with impudence: to be at the beck and call of any swindler who wants to ply his trade with impunity, fortified by counsel's opinion; then to go down to the House of Commons as special pleader for a bill which one knows is to rob one class in order to bribe another; to bustle through life with an axe to grind, and to cajole every useful fool into acting as a grindstone, faugh! is it worth it, all over again? No; I feel I must fill my new lungs with a fresher atmosphere."

"You forget the rewards, Gastineau," Herriard said, wondering how far the other was in earnest; "the rewards which were admittedly within your reach."

"Rewards! " he burst out contemptuously. "Fancy me a Judge. How long do you think my tongue, my spirit, would let me sit on the Bench? The Woolsack, which my flatterers promised me, do you see me there? Could I school myself to prose and mouth, and stage-manage the mummery of their Lordships' House? No, Herriard. This is a new birth of mine. I may drift back to the old trade; but if my heart was ever in it—which I doubt—it will never be there again."

"After such an indictment of a vocation which is mine too," Herriard observed, with a doubtful smile, "it is perhaps as well that our offensive alliance is coming to an end."

Gastineau glanced at him sharply, as though in search of a lurking sarcasm. "The intellectual side of our profession, as it should be, is one thing," he said quietly; "the practical scrimmage, as it is, is quite another. It has amused me to help you, to have something of the fight without any of the dust. Now——" he gave a significant shrug, and lighted another cigarette.

To Herriard it seemed unwise to pursue the delicate subject further. It was evident that his release from the partnership was forthcoming, and that was his great desire. "You have not explained the mystery of your recovery," he said.

There was what seemed an uncalled-for sneer in Gastineau's off-hand reply. "I scarcely thought it would interest you. However, I may tell you I owe my cure to Dr. Hallamar."

"Dr. Hallamar?" Herriard cried in surprise. "Why, you told me he declared he could do nothing for you." Gastineau gave a sharper's laugh at his gull's remonstrances. "Nor could he then," he returned, "seeing that the work was done, the cure effected."

"What, before I spoke of him to you?"

"Just so," Gastineau replied mockingly, "before you spoke of him to me. When that happened my cure was on the eve of completion. If it suits you to shut your eyes, my dear friend, it is to my advantage to keep mine open."

Herriard could not be certain whether the suggestion was meant that he had wilfully shut his eyes. He hated the thought that there was near being a grain of truth in the suspicion, if such it were. "I am glad," he said simply, "that my stupid indifference to Hallamar's work and fame was counteracted by your vigilance. I admit that my ignorance was inexcusable."

"It made no difference," Gastineau replied with cold brevity.

"Happily."

"Now, don't let me keep you. You are going to the Countess?"

The words were snapped out; their viciousness scarcely covered by the affectation of half-contemptuous indifference which Gastineau assumed.

"I was."

"But my resurrection has surprised you into neglecting even that agreeable duty. I don't wonder. My restoration to bodily activity is full of startling possibilities. By the way, I think you said you were seriously engaged to the Countess? "

"Seriously. Of course."

"In spite of my warning."

"Which I fear I cannot act upon."

"Ah, well, we shall see." Gastineau went over to a writing table, seated himself and took up a pen. "You will come and see me to-morrow evening," he said, without turning. But for the inflection, which was interrogative, the tone suggested a command. "I may have something important and definite to say to you then. At present my plans are not formulated."

"Very well," Herriard replied, troubled and doubtful.

"You will not fail? Good-night."

He looked round and nodded smilingly, then turned back to his writing. Herriard, with a strangely uncomfortable feeling, bade him good-night, and left him.

CHAPTER XIX

HERRIARD STANDS ALONE

ONCE outside the house, the tension at which Herriard's nerves had been strung during that surprising interview relaxed, and a whirl of troubling, anxious thoughts crowded to his mind. He seemed suddenly plunged from light into darkness; just as he seemed to be making harbour to be carried back upon an angry sea. He felt he was in no condition then to see Alexia; she would surely detect from his manner that something was wrong, and, unhappily, he was debarred from all explanation of his trouble. The lateness of the hour afforded him some excuse for not presenting himself; perhaps on the morrow his mind would be clearer and he more master of himself. As it was, just then he felt he must think, resolve and resolve again the problem, presented so threateningly, of Gastineau's persecution of Alexia, coupled with his recovery.

How did he, Geoffrey Herriard, stand in the matter? What part was he to play? What was his course, for Alexia's sake, to be? At present his position was clear. He stood between Gastineau and the object of his desire. At which of them would that subtle, resolute, relentless spirit strike first; at him or her? That could with no certainty be forecasted; Gastineau's mind did not move in men's common grooves of thought and action. He knew that well enough, and that the essence of his quondam tutor's aggressive tactics was surprise.

To know when to hit and where to hit had been his rule; he was wont to strike quickly and from the least expected side. It seemed pretty certain, so far as anything could be foreseen, that he would strike at Alexia. Altogether, the problem seemed so complex that Herriard was convinced that its ultimate solution must lie in its own developments. He was dealing with an abnormal character, and all he could do was to keep warily on his guard. Whichever way he looked at the situation his position was hateful; but it was one from which, for Alexia's sake, he could not flinch.

So, after a perturbed pacing of one of the Park's outer walks, he turned his steps towards his rooms in Mount Street. Abandoning the riddle of the future, his thoughts rested on the past. Now he understood why on two chance occasions Gastineau had been denied to him. He had been at the moment probably undergoing secret treatment at the hands of Dr. Hallamar. And the thousand pounds of which Gastineau had suddenly found himself in need: that sum was surely to make up the great surgeon's fee. Now it was plain why Gastineau had himself insisted on writing what had purported to be a note of invitation to Dr. Hallamar to see him, and had sent it off without giving Herriard a sight of it. In effect it must have been an injunction to the Doctor not to divulge even to his patient's friend that the cure was already effected. Yes; one after another, little incidents occurred to Herriard, who, having now the key of the puzzle, fitted them in convincingly. And so the night passed.

Next day he snatched an hour between the rising of the Courts and a consultation to go to Green Street.

"And I expected you every hour yesterday," Alexia said reproachfully.

"You had my note?" he replied. "Had I known I was to be kept all day it should have been sent earlier. But I expected, as you did, that every hour would bring me here."

"Were you really so busy?" she asked, still unsatisfied. "From early morning, till late at night?"

"Really, on my honour, dearest; busy and worried."

"Ah, worried?" she repeated almost wistfully. "Does a man ever have worries that can be shared?"

He shook his head with a smile. "Business worries. How can a woman share them? Yet every day must bring them if a man is conscientious in his work."

"Ah, yes; I understand." She laid her hand caressingly on his arm. "I shall always be proud of you and of your work, Geoffrey. I can guess how you must have worried for me."

"Naturally."

"Ah, but that is over," she said brightly.

"I hope so," he replied, forcing his tone to match hers. "Both my worries about you."

"Both?"

"That I might lose your case, and that you might refuse me."

There was a beam of love-light in her eyes as she replied, "One of your worries would have been superfluous if I could have refused you, Geoffrey. Don't look mystified. Should I have been worth worrying about if I were incapable of appreciating all you are and all you have done for me?"

The unconscious irony of the words seemed to stab him. "So little compared with what I should have done," he murmured; "so far from what I should be."

Alexia laughed protestingly. "My dear Geoffrey, you are abnormally, unreasonably modest. That the world does not take you at your own valuation is lucky for you, and the world."

"Yes," he said, "it is lucky, at least for me. Perhaps if you took me at my own valuation you would not look at me."

"Geoffrey! " she protested. There is a point beyond which the self-abasement of the man she loves begins to jar on a woman.

"Alexia," he continued, clasping her hands in his, "you do love me? "

"Yes, Geoffrey," she answered frankly, as her deep grey eyes looked into his. "You know I love you."

"But you hardly know me," he went on. "At least only as the world knows me, from the show-side. If, when we are married and you know me almost as I know myself, if then you find I am not all you thought me, if you find that what you call my modesty was not all affectation, that I stand lower in your estimation than I once did, will you love me then? "

"I will love you always, Geoffrey," she answered simply. "Do you think a woman is ever very wrong in her estimation of a man? "

"Where love and, perhaps, gratitude are concerned to blind her."

Alexia laughed. "Sometimes, where the woman is a fool. I don't think I am a fool, dear, or that you are unworthy of all I believe you to be."

Ah, that miserable secret that lay between them. Could he, dared he, tell her that all through the brilliant career for which she admired him he had been but the mouthpiece of a cleverer brain, and that man, of all others, Paul Gastineau? Yet if the confession were to come at all it should in honour be made forthwith. Every hour he delayed it added lie to lie. Yesterday he had thought the truth of the matter need never be spoken, to-day he felt that the disclosure must sooner or later be forced upon him. And if it was so surely to come, Alexia must at any cost learn the truth from his lips, not from another's, least of all Gastineau's. Yet he recognized that their secret was Gastineau's weapon to crush Alexia's love for him. How long would it be before he made his existence, his presence known to the woman of his desire; how long before he dealt that telling blow? He ought to forestall him; here, to his hand, was the opportunity. Yet, could he take it? It meant, he told himself, breaking his oath to Gastineau; it would mean trouble and fear to Alexia, it might mean his own discomfiture and ruin. No. At that moment with his arms round Alexia, with her sweet eyes speaking love to his, with her kisses on his lips, he could not give even a hint that should mar the delight of the present. The future seemed dark enough: the light of his love should burn till its extinction was forced upon him.

He looked at Alexia, the prize he had won, radiant in the beauty that was for him, and which was the index of a glorious soul. The thought of Gastineau's insinuation against this adorable woman filled him with an access of disgust. What lie could ever lurk beneath the light of those clear grey eyes, which looked into his with a gaze which shamed the good fortune he had seized under the shadow of falsehood. Is not the charm of a woman of honour compared with the Circean fascination of an adventuress as sunlight to darkness? The spell of Alexia's beauty was upon Herriard; and not of her beauty only, but of the innate nobility which differentiated her in his eyes from every other woman. He clasped her to him with passionate kisses, and in his heart vowed, that, cost what it might, the whole world should not take this prize from him; not the forces of right; no, nor the legions of evil, whose well-chosen representative in this case seemed to be Paul Gastineau.

"I will not have you disparage yourself to me, dear," Alexia said presently. They were standing lover-like, with hands clasped; the time of parting had come, for it was near the hour of Herriard's appointment in chambers. "You must not," she continued, with her love radiating through the playful reproof. "It reflects on my taste, when you run yourself down."

"Then I will not," he replied, abandoning himself to the moment's rapture. "Henceforth I will be what you would have me." And he vowed inwardly that he would never for a scruple risk the loss of this jewel; would never be fool enough to ring the doubtful coins he was giving for it that they might sound false.

In a few minutes he was, still in the exaltation of this wondrous love that he had found, speeding away to a commonplace, sordid consultation in a company case. What contrasts the world holds, he thought; and suddenly found himself heartily in agreement with Gastineau's late indictment of their profession. It was difficult to bring his mind down from that seventh heaven to the mundane level of advising a knot of greedy money-grubbers how to avoid a certain disgorgement of undue profits which threatened them. For the time hating and despising a profession which made him, the, nominally honourable, adviser of dishonest men, he kept himself rigidly from all show of sympathy with the sharp practitioners who sat before him; and held, without a suggestion of helpfulness to the dry questions of law which were involved. And when the smart solicitor had carried off his dissatisfied clients, arguing with glib tenacity the chances of law versus equity, he threw himself back in his chair with a sigh of unutterable relief that the air of the room was purer, and that he could indulge the delight of his new-found happiness.

Then a troublesome thought arose to check the delight of his reverie, his immediate interview with Gastineau, the time for which was almost come. He remembered how Gastineau had practically ordered him to attend that evening. It was galling; behind the distastefulness was, perhaps, a touch of apprehension. And indeed a brave man may be excused fear of the methods of an unscrupulous opponent. It is fighting in the dark, and courage may well fail where it can avail nothing. Still, with all his reluctance to meet Gastineau under their altered relationship, Herriard was glad to think that the projected interview might also show him where he stood: he might, though it was unlikely, get an inkling of Gastineau's plans, and whether he intended to resume his pursuit of Alexia. That he was feverishly anxious to know, since on it depended the question whether or not he was to be involved in a terribly unequal struggle with a man of abnormal cunning and determination. Yes; if it were to come, it was as well that it should come at once; suspense was unbearable.

Herriard rose and prepared to go out. He would dine at a restaurant near at hand, then start off for Mayfair and get the business over. As he opened the door of his chambers a man stood outside who raised his hat and addressed him by name.

CHAPTER XX

THE SOLUTION OF THE MYSTERY

"I WAS just coming to see you, Mr. Herriard, from Sir Henry Ferrars."

He handed his card, "Detective Inspector Quickjohn, New Scotland Yard."

"Ah, come in," Herriard said, leading the way back to his room, and closing the door. "Have you any news for me, Inspector?"

Inspector Quickjohn took the indicated seat and pulled out a large note-book, the orthodox preliminary to police communications. He was a rather smartly dressed man with a curious absence of any professional stamp upon him: he had an unobtrusive manner, quiet almost to dulness, only relieved by the alert, uncompromising eyes and a general suggestion of unflinching power.

"Well, Mr. Herriard," he answered, with legal deliberation, as he ran through the leaves of his note-book, "I have certain information which the Chief Commissioner has instructed me to give you."

"Ah, yes?" Herriard leaned forward with eager attention.

But Inspector Quickjohn was an important man, and, withal, a smart, acute officer, who, with his twenty years' training, was incapable of blurting out anything. If he had discovered another Gunpowder Plot he would not have imparted the information without a due amount of witness-box preliminaries and professional garnishing.

"You see, sir," he preambled, in the logical method of a Scotch sermon, "the Chief Commissioner some time back placed the Vaux House case in my hands, and I have made a specially careful study of it."

Herriard nodded.

"You will understand, sir," Mr. Quickjohn went on, holding his note-book half closed, with his thumb in the place to which he would in his own good time refer, "it is a very difficult, intricate case; one of the most baffling I remember."

"No doubt. But you have found out something?" Herriard suggested.

Mr. Quickjohn was not to be bustled. He raised his hand in a deferential appeal for patience.

"The question as to who the person was at whose hands the late Captain Martindale met his death has given me a rare lot of trouble. You see, Mr. Herriard, it was so long ago, and there was, if I may say so, such a crowd to choose from."

"Just so," Herriard put in, forcing back the expression of his growing impatience.

"*Primâ facie*," continued the Inspector reflectively, "*primâ facie*, I should not have troubled to look beyond the Countess Alexia von Rohnburg."

The declaration brought a great relief to Herriard. Somehow there had been in his mind a vague dread that the detective might have found some plausible reason for bringing the matter home to Alexia.

"No, no," he said quickly and with decision. "The Countess knew nothing of the affair."

Mr. Quickjohn felt called upon to justify his former attitude.

"There was a good colourable *primâ facie* case," he maintained, with a manner which claimed that his long and eventful experience entitled to respect any theory to which he thought proper to commit himself. "You must recollect, Mr. Herriard, the lady in question was the last person known to have been with the deceased before his death was discovered; then there was the finding of the little dagger with which the crime must have been committed, and the evidence of the maid, Gibson, that the Countess had worn it as an ornament in her hair that evening. Then——"

It was more than Herriard could stand. "Yes, yes, Mr. Quickjohn," he interrupted impatiently, "we know all about that. I admit there was ground for a *primâ facie* suspicion. But I and, presumably, you, know now that the Countess was not cognizable of Captain Martindale's death. However, you have not come to tell me that? You have found the man——"

Mr. Quickjohn raised his thick hand in protest. He liked to give his evidence in his own way, and judged leading questions unnecessary and a mistake. He was perhaps rather surprised that a counsel of Herriard's standing should not know better than to try and hurry him. "I have," he replied, with marked deliberation and a suggestion of touched dignity, "I have, after careful sifting of the materials at my disposal, made a discovery and, I think, arrived at a satisfactory settlement of the question as to the identity of the person at whose hands the Captain met his death."

Herriard, seeing his mistake, now merely nodded him on.

"You see, sir," Quickjohn proceeded, in his more business-like, witness-box manner, "the difficulty has been in searching for a person answering the description among the whole list of the Duchess of Lancashire's guests. There were four hundred and forty-two noblemen and gentlemen invited to Vaux House that night, and no record available of those who attended, those who were absent, or those who may have been there uninvited."

"Yes," Herriard commented, "you had a difficult task."

"Yes, and no mistake," Quickjohn agreed, "and I am prepared to admit that if it had not been through a mere chance, I should never have been able to put my finger on the right individual."

"Ah! "

"The clue came through the deceased man Campion, who was to have given evidence in the late trial. An unfortunate occurrence, Mr. Herriard, Campion's fatal accident," Quickjohn observed, in a tone of parenthetical regret; "more particularly as it was occasioned by an absolutely mistaken act on his part."

"How so? What do you mean? " Herriard asked, in some surprise.

"Well, sir, my meaning is this," Quickjohn answered deliberately, with the superiority of one who is sure of his facts; "it will be within your recollection that the deceased man, Campion, deposed before he died that the accident happened as he was running in pursuit of a hansom in which was a man whom he asserted he had recognized as the party he had seen leaving Vaux House under suspicious circumstances on the night of Captain Martindale's alleged murder."

"Yes? "

"Well, Mr. Herriard," pursued Quickjohn, with an air of infinite witness-box wisdom, "the late Campion was quite mistaken in thinking he had recognized his man in that hansom. He could not possibly have done so, seeing that the party whom Campion had seen escaping from Vaux House on the night in question has been dead some years."

"You know that?" Herriard asked mechanically, uncertain whether to be relieved or disappointed.

Quickjohn nodded. "Met his death shortly after the Vaux House affair. So it stands to reason that he could not have been the party whom Campion saw in the hansom."

"Naturally. And who," Herriard asked, with intense curiosity, "was the man we have been in search of, and who, you say, is dead?"

Mr. Quickjohn liked to tell his stories in his own way, and considered he had earned the privilege of doing so. "Well, sir," he responded, with irritating deliberation, "it is very curious how, as every detective knows, the merest accident will often put one on the right scent. And what I have to tell you now, sir, is the result of a chance remark which fell from the late Campion. It was this way. When we heard at the Yard that he had appeared on the scene, and we knew something of what his evidence was to be, I, having charge of the case, which, on the discovery of the little weapon at Vaux House, had been placed in my hands, thought it well to have a private interview with Campion on my own account. You see, Mr. Herriard, if the Countess was innocent it was our business to find the guilty party. So I got hold of Campion and asked him to come up to my place one evening and talk the matter over quietly. He comes over to Brixton and I got from him everything that could be of the slightest use in working up the case. You see, Mr. Herriard," he diverged again tantalizingly, "the questions we should put are very different from those the solicitors ask; we look at the case from a working point of view. It was my object to get an idea whether the man Campion saw leaving by the window was a gentleman, likely to have been a guest, or a flash operator working the function for what he could pinch in the way of jewellery, plate, etc."

"I see."

"I 've known such cases," Mr. Quickjohn resumed, with a dangerous approach to reminiscence which happily passed off. "However, I was pretty satisfied, after putting a number of searching questions, that the party I had to look for was not one of the criminal classes, but in all probability, a *bona fide* guest. Now, a curious thing happened, Mr. Herriard, which I did n't think much of at the time, though it occurred to me afterwards to follow up the clue. We were sitting there in my parlour over a cigar and a glass of grog, and I was drawing Campion out, trying him backwards and forwards to get everything he could tell me of the man's appearance and manner. Well, we were sitting, as I say, in my parlour, and I 've a lot of photos put about there, portraits of Judges and well-known counsel that I 've come in contact with in various cases,—I 've a framed sketch of yourself, Mr. Herriard, done in Court by a friend of mine clever with his pencil—well, I was worrying Campion about the very minutest details of this man's appearance, when suddenly he caught sight of a photo on the wall, and he says, 'There,' he says, 'the chap I saw had a face just like that, and if that is n't the man——' I jumped round in my chair and looked to where he was pointing. 'That,' I said, 'that 's not exactly our man, my friend, although, it is curious, I 've never seen another face like that. That is the late Mr. Paul Gastineau, K.C., M.P.'"

Herriard sprang up from his chair as though shot. "Gastineau!"

Mr. Quickjohn nodded several times with a suggestion of infinite sagacity and astuteness. "That 's the party, sir: although I laughed at the idea at first."

"Gastineau!"

Herriard's excitement surpassed any effect Mr. Quickjohn had anticipated. It was altogether more than he could account for in a member of an even-blooded profession. "Strange discoveries we light upon sometimes," he remarked sententiously. "To think that a man in the position of Mr. Paul Gastineau could be the party wanted. I can well understand, sir, you can't believe it at the first blush. Let me tell you how I arrived at my conclusions."

Herriard did believe it. Somehow he felt he wanted no proof. The charge, monstrous till suggested, seemed to fit exactly: nothing now could disprove it.

"Yes, tell me," he said, recovering himself by an effort as he sank down to his chair and turned his strained face toward his visitor.

In characteristic matter-of-fact fashion Mr. Quickjohn accepted the invitation and proceeded.

"As I say, I had no idea of putting two and two together at first. My only conclusion was that if the party wanted had a singular face, anything like the late Mr. Gastineau's, he would be easily recognized—if I could only come across him. Of course I made a note of the similarity, and Campion soon after left me.

Well, sir, I did n't see much chance of running across Mr. Gastineau's double, for such Campion declared his man was; however, I pegged away at the case and, after a lot of trouble, got a full list of the gentlemen guests invited to Vaux House on the occasion in question. Dukes and duchesses are not the easiest people in the world to deal with, as you may be aware, Mr. Herriard. They seem to think their position puts them above taking reasonable trouble or interest in anything. They want things done by magic and won't see that our methods at the Yard are not exactly those of the Arabian Nights. Well, I did get the list, and, on looking down it and wondering how long it would take me to find out which of four hundred and forty odd noblemen and gentlemen most closely resembled Mr. Gastineau, K.C., M.P., what should I come to but that very same gentleman's name. As I read it, the idea seemed to strike me in a flash, not merely why might n't he have done it after all, but that he had done it. Merely a conjecture, true, but I set to work on it."

"Yes, that conjecture would be a long way from the proof," Herriard observed, with certainty already in his mind.

"Naturally," assented Mr. Quickjohn, "and moral proof is often far from legal evidence. However, I may say I have succeeded, after a lot of work, in obtaining corroborative evidence which brings home the crime, circumstantially at least, to the late Mr. Gastineau."

"Ah, yes? Tell me."

"The affair took place a long time ago," Quickjohn proceeded, "and it is, as you know, sir, difficult to get men to carry their memories back over several years to remember circumstances important enough to us, trivial to them. However, I have succeeded in tracing a man, one of the Duke's extra footmen he was, who distinctly recollects a gentleman answering to Mr. Gastineau's description coming into the house without a hat or overcoat. The time of night would fit in with that of Captain Martindale's death. The man I speak of took Mr. Gastineau for a late arrival, and wondered where he had come from without a hat. His coat he might have left in his carriage or even come without one, as it was a warm night. That fixed him in the man's mind, but on these occasions there is too much bustle to give attention long to anything, and he thought no more about it."

"It is a good piece of evidence," Herriard remarked mechanically.

"Yes," Mr. Quickjohn agreed, with a touch of self-satisfaction. "But I go farther, sir. I have also established the fact that Mr. Gastineau left Vaux House shortly afterwards, having obtained his hat and overcoat from the cloak-room, the overcoat being a grey colour, such as the late Campion deposed to as worn by the man he saw the second time. Now, Mr. Herriard," the Inspector with a click put the elastic band round his note-book, which, by the way, he had not referred to, "that 's as far as I have got at present, but it seems to me pretty conclusive evidence as far as it goes, and the Chief Commissioner thought you might like to know it."

"Yes, indeed; thank you, Inspector," Herriard responded, indulging the thought of how little the astute officer guessed of the real import to him.

"Of course," said that officer, pocketing his book, "the case is not complete, not nicely rounded off, as

I hope to have it before it 's done with. There is a link missing in the chain, as no doubt you perceive, sir."

Herriard did indeed know it, and that he could, if he would, supply it.

"The motive? " he suggested casually.

"That 's it, sir," said Quickjohn. "If I can only discover that Mr. Gastineau and Captain Martindale had not been on the best of terms, had had a difference, say about a lady, that would make the case against the late Gastineau perfect."

"Have you any chance of finding that? "

Mr. Quickjohn looked inscrutably wise. "I am in hopes of doing so. But that will mean setting to work in quite a fresh direction."

"You have no clue as yet? "

Mr. Quickjohn rose. As an artist he cared to show only his finished work, and this was scarcely more than blocked in.

"I have several scources of information to tap," he replied vaguely, "but nothing to report as yet. Well, I 'll say good evening, Mr. Herriard. I thought you might be interested to hear I had put my finger on the party, if one may say so of a deceased man. I 'm only sorry the party is not alive," he went on, with a suspicion of jocularity. "It would have been a big sensational case and would have made my fortune in the profession. There's all the difference between a big crime in the upper classes and the same in the lower as there is between, you may say, the Royal Opera at Covent Garden and a nigger with a banjo outside a public-house. Still I hope what I have so far cleared up will be satisfactory to you and your late client. Good evening, sir."

CHAPTER XXI

THE MASK FALLS

THE door had closed upon Inspector Quickjohn, and Herriard sat motionless, as though dazed by this last turn of the situation. He had been wandering blindfold in a maze, and had suddenly found the centre. Or, rather, he felt as though he had been moving unsuspectingly over the meshes of a great spider's web, had reached at length the central plexus, and was there held, uncertain from which point the fell spinner of the web would dart down to attack him. Which was the safe way out of this coil of evil? At least he would not wait paralyzed: he must act.

The chiming of a clock warned him of his engagement to Gastineau. No; he could not go there again. The man might not, after all, be an actual murderer, Martindale might have brought his death on himself. Still, if anything in this world were sure, it was certain that Paul Gastineau was a son of evil, as full of cunning malice as a man could be. How should he meet him again, how could he touch that guilty hand? Never. The breach must be made at once, and if a fight was inevitable, he must declare it.

Herriard drew a case of telegraph forms towards him and filled one in to Gastineau under his assumed name. "Detained in chambers, sorry cannot see you to-night." He went out and sent it off, then turned into a restaurant hard by and ate his dinner with what appetite was left him.

"He killed Martindale," that was the one fact which kept crying aloud in his brain. He could think of nothing else. How fate had completed the circle! He tried to analyze the consequences. Was this knowledge a weapon in his hand to crush Gastineau? Yes. No. At least, how could he use it? Would it not mean that Gastineau with his devilish ingenuity would probably turn aside the blow that looked so telling, and make a swift, fierce counter attack to his opponent's destruction? How could he, Herriard, accuse of a terrible crime the man with whom he had had such a questionable connection? He was the only man in the world who knew that Gastineau had survived his injuries. What an incredible, and, indeed, disreputable, tale he would have to tell if he ventured to speak out.

Underlying the whole terrible perplexity was a novel dread of meeting Gastineau. Herriard determined that he would return to his chambers at once and write a letter which should break their acquaintance in unmistakable terms once for all. Fortunately there would be no need to touch upon this last reason; Gastineau's expressed opinion of Alexia's guilt was quite sufficient to justify her future husband in ceasing to be friendly with him; indeed it was the course which honour indicated.

So, turning over in his mind the most effective wording of the letter, Herriard walked back to the Temple. He would write the letter and post it at once; so it would be off his mind, and the sooner he could make Gastineau show his hand the sooner would his suspense be at an end.

He went in, lighted a lamp and began the draft of his letter, the most distasteful he had ever had to write, but as imperative a task as it was repugnant. He wrote: "I have not been able to keep my appointment with you this evening. I had a long consultation after the Courts rose, and have been kept in chambers by other business which I did not foresee. But there is another reason why I am not coming on to see you to-night. Our meetings of late have shown me that we are no longer working harmoniously together as formerly. Whose the fault it seems scarcely worth considering, but the fact stands that our differences are becoming daily more accentuated, and we are, above all, seriously at issue upon one, to me, most vital point. I think, then, that it is time our connection came to an end, as our friendship seems already to have done. Your restoration to health and active life obviates any reproach which I might otherwise incur. The time for separation is apt, and you will understand that I could not continue to meet on terms of friendship a man who accuses of a terrible crime the woman who will shortly be my wife and of whose innocence I am absolutely convinced. This determination, to which I see no alternative, in no way contradicts the sense of my obligations to you. Your advice and help in——" he stopped. He could hardly be churlish enough to part from Gastineau without an acknowledgment of all he owed him. And yet was it wise or safe to put down that indebtedness in black and white, and give it to this abnormally unscrupulous man?

Herriard's whole legal training and experience told him it was rash and dangerous, nothing less than the forging of a very effective weapon to be used against himself.

Yet if the fact of their partnership was ever to be brought up against him, he told himself, he would not deny it, even could he do so successfully. He had done with him now, he was resolved; and by the truth he stood ready to atone for what had been false in his career. Still that was no reason why he need make his acknowledgments to Gastineau in so explicit a form that all the world might comprehend exactly what their connection had been. He drew his pen through the last words of the draft and began the passage again.

"To your advice——"

A knock came at the outer door. It startled him disagreeably, ominously. He laid down his pen, wondering who this late visitor could be. Opening the door he found himself face to face with the man on whom he would have been glad never to set eyes again.

"You, Gastineau?" he exclaimed, in a negative tone.

"I," came the almost jeering response. "I hope I have not startled you."

As Herriard drew back, Gastineau walked past him into the entrance lobby with the air of a man who could dispense with an invitation and would take no refusal. Herriard closed the door, and, indicating the way, followed him into the room.

"So you would not come to see me, Mr. Herriard," Gastineau said, with a sneer, as he turned abruptly, his keen eyes taking in all that was in the room. "It was, however, necessary that I should confer with you to-night—you know how I hate procrastination—so I have come to see you. I wonder what the business was that kept you here. The composition of a love-letter?"

The man's contemptuous, malignant tone seemed to touch the utmost limits of a sneer. His quick glance had noticed the letter to himself, which lay half written on the desk.

"No," Herriard answered quietly; "not a love-letter."

"That 's well," Gastineau returned, "for it is about this love affair of yours that I want to talk to you."

"Holding as we do such different opinions of Countess Alexia, I would rather the subject were not mentioned between us," Herriard replied. He felt that the crisis had come, and that it would not do for him to show weakness. He must face this man, and, after all, with the knowledge just gained, he was not defenceless.

"But," objected Gastineau, in his quick, peremptory way, "it must be mentioned. You say we are at issue upon the subject. We are—more seriously than you suppose. And for that very reason we must come to an understanding, and without delay."

He had taken his stand opposite Herriard on the farther side of the writing table, ignoring the chair which the other had pulled round for him.

"Very well, then," Herriard responded simply.

Gastineau took out a cigarette and lighted it thoughtfully, with the air of a man considering how best he should frame what he had to say. Herriard sat and watched him in expectant silence.

"The case I have to put to you, my dear Herriard, is somewhat involved," Gastineau began, in a tone whose lightness rather surprised his listener; "and I shall have to touch upon a subject or two which I would rather avoid. But, you see, when a man performs the feat of a veritable resurrection such as mine he is bound to find the line of his life tangled into certain awkward complications. That is inevitable; you will grant that?"

The demand was made in the same easy, buoyant tone. Herriard nodded.

"No doubt it is," he answered curtly.

"So long as I lay in my living grave on that couch," pursued Gastineau, exhaling a long whiff of smoke, "I looked upon my past life, my former existence as a closed book. I anticipated no reason ever to unclasp it. But I reckoned without our Dr. Hallamar."

"Yes," Herriard responded, as the other man paused.

"Now," Gastineau continued, always in his tone of airy argument, "it being agreed that my coming to active life again must upset all calculations, the question, among others, of its interference with our reciprocal arrangement, our partnership, comes up."

"Naturally," Herriard acquiesced readily.

"Naturally." Gastineau took up the word. "I wake to life to find you filling the place which rightly belongs to me, and which I want, or, at least, might want to occupy myself."

"Yes," replied Herriard quietly, "and which in common justice I should have no wish to keep from you."

Gastineau took the cigarette from his lips with a deprecating wave of the hand. "Don't be in a hurry, Mr. Geoffrey Herriard," he said, with a patronizing laugh. "I am not at all sure that I want your place, and if I did, I fancy there is room in the world, legal and political, for both of us. It is not there, in the House, or at the Bar, that we are likely to be rivals."

Naturally he would not guess how clear the significance of his last words was to Herriard who sat watching and wondering what place there could be in the world for this callous, gibing man-slayer. "I don't see why we should be rivals at all," he observed tentatively.

Gastineau was lighting another cigarette. "No, my dear fellow, you don't. Because the book I just spoke of has been kept closed to you. I must open it at a certain page, and show you why."

"Yes? "

Gastineau took a step forward and seated himself on the corner of the writing table. He was half turned away from Herriard. For a few seconds he smoked meditatively and there was silence between them. At length he spoke. "Once upon a time, before my ill-luck," he laughed,—"I refer to the railway accident—brought me into connection with Mr. Geoffrey Herriard, I was in love, deeply in love, with a certain lady whom I will name in a moment. When I became dead to the world all idea of that sort of thing was out of the question; but the *status quo* has very strangely and unexpectedly cropped up again. You have followed? Since our acquaintance, my mantle has fallen upon the said Mr. Geoffrey Herriard, and on the whole he has worn it worthily. It is curious that he should moreover have lighted upon a certain favour which I had proposed to pin to the said mantle, and had lost. My friend is welcome to keep the serviceable cloak, but the particular ornament with which he proposes to adorn it I must ask him to give up."

He paused, and a dead, tense silence followed. Gastineau smoked on nonchalantly, waiting for the other man to speak.

At length the reply came in a low voice.

"You ask me to give it up on the assumption that you have more right to it than I? "

Gastineau nodded. "Just so."

"I deny it."

Gastineau rose to his feet and flung the cigarette-end into the fire-place. "I was afraid you might," he said coolly, as he turned and faced Herriard; then added, "afraid for your sake, not my own."

The preliminaries were over now, and the fight was to begin in real earnest. Nevertheless Gastineau's manner was as cool and easy as ever. It was like a light comedian playing, with his characteristic methods, a strong, dramatic part.

"I deny," Herriard repeated, leaning back and meeting his look, "I deny that the prior claim you allege is valid."

"Allege? "

"Allege. Were you ever engaged to the Countess Alexia von Rohnburg? "

"Practically, yes."

"I take upon myself to deny that also." How he had come to loathe this man whose manifest character fitted in every moment more closely with his recently gained knowledge of him.

"You do? " Gastineau laughed, but it was an ugly laugh now. "On what grounds, pray? "

"I think," Herriard answered, "the Countess Alexia would support my denial. Anyhow, I am content to maintain my position on the assumption that she was never engaged to you."

"And if you find you are wrong? "

"To retire in your favour, at the Countess's bidding."

"I think," Gastineau returned, in a set tone of determination, "we need not wait for that."

Herriard thought of Alexia, then of the man before him, and his obvious intention to renew the old persecution. He rose and faced him.

"I do not understand you, Gastineau," he said steadily. "You say you believe Countess Alexia guilty of Martindale's death, yet it seems you want to marry her."

Gastineau gave an ugly laugh, the scoffing, derisive note of intellectual evil. "Why not, my good Herriard? *L'un n'empèche pas l'autre.* The devil in a woman has an irresistible attraction for some men; men of a certain enterprise and courage. You remember the notorious Raymond case? I forget the average number of offers of marriage Mrs. Raymond received every day during the inquest and trial. The Countess is much more suited to be my wife than yours. Anyhow, I mean to claim her."

Herriard flushed with indignation. Alexia the wife of this cold-blooded schemer, this incarnation of militant spite? The idea was hideous, unbearable.

"The Countess Alexia is engaged to me," he said with restraint. "I do not mean to give her up to you or any man."

Gastineau just let his eyes rest on Herriard's face for an instant. Then, laughing, he turned and lighted another cigarette. "I am sorry to hear it for your own sake, my dear Geoffrey," he replied, with the dangerous suavity of the feline's velvet paw. "You mean to fight?"

Herriard laughed now, bitterly enough.

"You surely can scarcely expect me to give up the Countess at your cool request."

Gastineau shrugged. "Perhaps not," he returned slowly. "It may need more than a request. In the meantime—you are an ungrateful dog, Geoffrey Herriard. It only shows even I can be a fool sometimes; I actually thought I might expect gratitude from you."

"I am grateful, very grateful to you," Herriard returned sturdily. "I am fully sensible of all you have done for me and of the debt I owe you. But when you talk of my giving up to you the woman who is going to be my wife you are asking more than is reasonable, you are asking me to pay you by robbing another."

"Indeed? " Gastineau, still in his mood of devilish coolness, raised his brows in a sneer. "I did not think it was at bad as that. What a change the point of view makes. Now my idea is that I am simply asking you, in return for the benefits you have received from me, not to make a fuss about returning some lost property of mine which you have accidentally found."

"I must deny that," Herriard returned, with set face.

"Deny what?" was the bland inquiry.

"That the property, that the Countess Alexia, ever was yours."

Gastineau's face assumed a look of tolerant protest. It was as though he were considering what argument he could use with a man whose reasoning was so dense and trivial. So for a few moments he smoked in silence. Then he asked, "She has told you so? "

"Practically."

"Ah! " Gastineau affected to see his way clear once more. "The Countess has mentioned my name to you? "

"Yes."

The other nodded receptively. "What, may I ask, has she told you? "

The question was pertinent enough; more critical than Gastineau let his manner indicate.

"Merely," Herriard answered, "that you made love to her, and that she did not return the feeling. That should explain my refusal to yield my claim to yours."

"It might," Gastineau sneered, "to a shallow mind." Manifestly, he was pricked disagreeably by Herriard's pointed answer; his coolness was now maintained by an effort. "You might," he continued, "by this have known me better than to suppose that I should allow myself to be defrauded of what I choose to set my heart upon. But we shall see. So the Countess told you she did not reciprocate my feeling. That was a somewhat gratuitous and easy statement to make about a dead man. Don't you think so. By the way," he gave Herriard no time to answer the question, fixing his piercing eyes upon him with the look that seemed to penetrate all prevarication, all evasion, to scorch up the mere fencing of the tongue, "I presume the Countess has no idea that I am alive? "

"None," came the ready answer. "She certainly believes you to be dead."

Obviously frank though the reply was, Gastineau demanded again, "You have not told her that I am alive? "

"No, I tell you."

"Or even half alive? "

"No, no. I should be sorry to."

"Would you? " he snapped suspiciously. "Why? "

The question was an awkward one, seeing that Herriard had no desire to irritate Gastineau unnecessarily. He gave a shrug. "It might cause her the embarrassment of an unpleasant *arrière pensée.*"

"Why embarrassment? Why unpleasant?" The sharp questions came with the insistence not merely of a keen cross-examiner, but of a jealous man.

"The thought that she could never return your affection," Herriard answered, as plausibly as he could.

"That," Gastineau returned, with quiet incisiveness, "is a matter you may leave to me."

The cool superiority of his tone stung Herriard, giving him the necessary spur to stand up to his dangerous adversary. "Understand, Gastineau," he retorted, "that I decline to leave it to you."

"You do?"

"As Countess Alexia's affianced husband, I do—naturally."

"Naturally!" Gastineau repeated the word with an infinity of mocking scorn. "You would. It was only to be expected. And, as the expected, I am prepared to meet it."

"Very well," Herriard replied. "We now know how we stand. I am, at least, glad you pay me the compliment of anticipating that I should not be ready to give up the Countess."

"It is scarcely a compliment from my point of view," Gastineau rejoined, with a vicious drawing back of the lips into the semblance of a smile. "If you were not a fool, Geoffrey Herriard, you would know better than to oppose yourself to a man who lets nothing thwart him."

"We may be equally determined in this affair," Herriard returned with restraint; "you to persecute the Countess, I to protect her."

"Persecute?" Gastineau cried, with a short, high-pitched laugh. "Persecute is a strong word, Herriard."

"Yet, I fancy, the correct one."

"Where did you learn it? From the Countess?"

"Perhaps."

Gastineau drew in his breath sharply through his clenched teeth. "Very well. And so we are going to fight. My last piece of advice to my apt pupil," he sneered, "might be to consider the consequences of joining issue with a man who, he knows, never submits to defeat, who, he might imagine, will let nothing stand in his way, even a life, when once his resolve is taken."

"I quite understand that; it needs no effort of the imagination," Herriard retorted, as for a moment his temper and his repugnance for the man who, with such glib assurance, stood threatening him, got the better of his restraint.

The slight hit told. The only question was whether it had not been a chance one from a bow drawn at a venture. Into Gastineau's eyes there sprang that fierce look of piercing enquiry which was characteristic of the man's avid mind. "You know that," he snarled, the effort at sneering coolness ousted by the obtrusion of a dark suspicion. "You know that," he repeated insolently, "do you?"

But the other man was now on his guard. "Evidently, by your own showing, I ought to believe you capable of anything," he answered, with almost a sneer bred of his consciousness of power in reserve.

"You meant more than that," Gastineau insisted.

"Could I mean more than that?" came the obvious retort.

Gastineau for a moment was silent. Only his fierce eyes seemed to scorch into Herriard's mind, to read the working of his secret soul.

Then with a snatch he took up his hat. "Enough of this," he exclaimed with vicious impatience. "I am never sorry when words fail and we come to action. I have your answer, Herriard? You will not break off this engagement and make way for me?"

"Decidedly not. The question is hardly worth answering."

The words, considering to whom spoken, were bold, but Gastineau seemed scarcely to hear them. On his way towards the door he had moved round to the side of the writing table. His eyes were fixed upon a card which lay on it, a card which announced the visit of Detective Inspector Quickjohn. Herriard had gone towards the door to open it, and now turned to see why his visitor lingered. Gastineau's glance had shifted from Quickjohn's card to the unfinished letter to himself which still lay open on the desk. In an instant he had grasped the fact that he had surprised Herriard in the act of writing to him.

"A letter to me," he exclaimed, as with a swift movement he caught up the paper. "I may read it, and so save trouble, or, at least, delay." As he spoke his eyes were rapidly running down the page. The purport of the letter was already his when Herriard put forth a protesting hand.

"It is of no importance now," he said hastily. "Your visit has rendered it needless for me to write."

But Gastineau kept the paper from the other's hand. His face as he read grew dark and sneering, and a sneer was but that cynic's handy mask. "It is written to me, intended for me," he maintained, turning to evade Herriard's effort to snatch the letter. "I have surely a right to read it."

"You have none," Herriard objected.

The sharp eyes had got the pith of the letter, and Gastineau threw it on the table. "So! " He seemed to reflect for a few moments, to be making a swift resolve. Herriard, intending to let him out, had left the door ajar. Gastineau moved suddenly forward, and, instead of, as the other expected, passing out, he quickly shut the door and locked it.

CHAPTER XXII

THE STRUGGLE

IT was all done in one swift action; the outcome of a planned determination. As Gastineau turned, Herriard saw that the scoffing contemptuous coolness had gone: his expression now was more that of a feline animal on the spring. The thought uppermost in his mind now was, "Is it possible that I ever called this man my friend? " He saw a crisis had come; how his letter should have hastened and accentuated it he could not comprehend. But that was due to the slower power of perception in his own mind compared with his adversary's.

There was a curiously set look of relentless purpose in Gastineau's eyes as he turned; one which, among all the varying expressions he had noticed, Herriard had never seen there before. It was the look with which a Prelate of the Inquisition might have watched a victim in the torture chamber.

"A reckoning between us, Mr. Herriard, seems more pressing than I had supposed." He spoke with tight lips just opening enough to clip out the words. Herriard said nothing; only stood watchfully expectant with, now, a thought of Martindale's fate suggesting itself. So he waited for the other to declare the intention that was manifestly in his mind.

Gastineau stood with his hands behind him; pale, thin almost to frailness, but the very embodiment of mental boldness; the courage of the head, that can unhesitatingly attack greater strength of body.

"So," he said slowly, "the business that kept you away from Devereux Street to-night was the writing of a letter to say you could not come."

"Hardly that."

"Perhaps your visitor detained you," Gastineau continued, in a key which was the prelude of mischief, the muttering of a coming storm. "Your visitor," he pointed to the card, "Detective—what 's his name?—Quickjohn. I do not quite understand you, Mr. Herriard. May I ask what Inspector Quickjohn came to see you about? "

"About the Vaux House business," Herriard answered curtly.

"Ah! Why does he come to see you about it? "

"Sir Henry Ferrars sent him. He knows I am interested in the case."

"And what had he to tell you? "

"Pardon me, Gastineau; I think we agreed that the subject should not be discussed between us."

"Perhaps," he replied insistently. "But my interest is now at least equal to yours, through the same source, the Countess Alexia. What did Quickjohn come to tell you? "

Evasion was difficult under the searchlight of those transfixing eyes, but the whole truth could not be told. "He came to say," Herriard answered, "that he is following the matter up."

"With what result? "

"No definite result at present."

"He took the trouble to come and tell you that? "

Gastineau was holding him to the point with a greater than professional tenacity.

"I had told them at Scotland Yard that they seemed inclined to let the case drop."

Gastineau paused, but his was the silence of disbelief. He took a few sharp, impatient steps to his former position. Then spoke abruptly, his viciousness smouldering and ever ready to burst into flame. "Shall I tell you what I think of you, Geoffrey Herriard?"

Herriard shrugged. "I do not care."

"What," Gastineau went on, ignoring the reply, "I think of you by the light of your recent conduct towards me, the man who made you, the man who can, and will, unmake you?"

"I have nothing to reproach myself with," Herriard said, beginning to tire of the scene.

"That," retorted Gastineau, "shows you in a more contemptible light still." The fire was glowing now, any instant might bring the flame. "You think yourself a clever fellow, Herriard, but your really clever man discriminates. He does not play tricks upon men cleverer than himself."

"I am not aware that I have tried to play a trick on you, Gastineau."

"No? What do you call the withholding your knowledge of the one man in Europe who could cure me?"

"I did not. I——"

Gastineau stopped him with a sharp, impatient gesture. "Don't trouble to deny it. You met and knew Hallamar weeks, months, before it suited you to mention him to me. Oh, don't protest: I have neither time nor inclination to listen to your lies. I don't blame you. I might have done the same in your place.

My being a helpless cripple, a man with both feet literally in the grave, a brain without a body, meant everything to you. You played your game, taking the risk, and lost it; lost it through a miscalculation of our respective smartness."

"You are wrong, Gastineau, utterly," Herriard broke in with indignation.

"Am I? " he returned, with a sneer. "I know you, Geoffrey Herriard, better, possibly, than you know yourself. You have been playing a dangerous game; are playing it still; but you have made more than one false move, and the game is lost. There only remains for you to pay."

He stopped; shutting his lips with the suggestion that he had no more to say. The pause of that dark, evil mind, between speech and action, was like the crouching of a tiger for its spring; like the breathless hold-up which precedes the first flash of a storm. Gastineau stood facing Herriard with a world of concentrated malignity blazing in his eyes, the tokens of the fiery soul behind them. Herriard waited, nervously alert. He saw the futility of protesting against the charges; this man was his enemy, whose cue and desire it was to quarrel; a struggle, terrible, perhaps to the death, was inevitable.

For some moments the two men watched each other, the one seeming to cast about for an opening for attack, the other apprehensively strung for defence. Surely that keen, active brain would not need to wait long. No. Gastineau's lips parted, showing the white teeth, still set as he spoke through them, spoke as with a purpose of making an end quickly.

"You were writing that letter to me"—he pointed to it—"after your interview with Quickjohn. Why? "

"I had no time to write before."

"But you were coming—don't fence, it is waste of time—you were coming to my house this evening, or you would have telegraphed earlier."

"No," Herriard replied watchfully. "I had my doubts as to whether it would serve any good purpose, and meant to have written before."

"I wish you would understand," Gastineau said cuttingly, "that there is nothing gained by lying to me. Accepting your statement for what it may be worth, Quickjohn told you something that clenched your decision?"

Each man's eyes were fixed on the other's; Herriard's held to Gastineau's by the fascination of the evil and danger they signalled.

"Did he? did he?" The question came hissed out with sharp insistence. For Herriard, posed by the direct challenge, hesitated, at a loss for the moment as to the course he should take.

"You believe nothing I say; I will say nothing."

"Pouf!" It was a poor evasion, and the strong man blew it aside with a contemptuous exclamation. "Just realize the position, Herriard," he said; "the position in which you stand. I am a dead man; a man with no known or legally recognized existence. As such, I am all-powerful, and, with my brains, intangible."

"So long," Herriard found courage to retort, "as I do not proclaim your existence."

"Precisely." The look on Gastineau's face, as he nodded a ready acquiescence, told Herriard he had spoken rashly. "So long. And the longer the better for me. In short, it would be to my interest that your silence should last till the Day of Judgment."

"I have no intention of breaking it," Herriard said, as coolly as his nerves allowed.

"I might doubt that," Gastineau returned, "when I find you and the celebrated Inspector Quickjohn putting your heads together. They say two heads are better than one, but that depends upon the heads. I think I will back mine against yours and Quickjohn's. Now, if you hope to leave this room alive, which is entirely my affair, just say what that fellow told you about me."

He looked at his watch, and coolly replaced it. Herriard found himself asking whether, after all, he was not being made the victim of a transcendent piece of bluff. Gastineau's acuteness and penetration were manifest enough; but his power? Had not he himself the whip hand, if only he would not let it be paralyzed by the stronger brain? His enemy was but a head-fighter, a tongue duellist; there was a clever suggestion of something more; but if it came to that, to physical force, the advantage would be the other way.

"Quickjohn knows nothing about you," he said shortly, throwing off the vague fear that had possessed him. "He is as ignorant as the rest of the world that you are alive. Now, may I ask you to go? I have had enough of these recriminations, and do not mean to allow myself to be terrorized over by you. Threatening is a game that two can play at, and the odds are scarcely on your side."

He took a step towards the door; then remembered that it was locked.

"It is a recoiling threat on your part."

Herriard heard the significant rejoinder, but paid no heed to it. He was sick of the scene, and the evil presence in his room was repugnant to him. "Give me the key," he demanded, turning.

Gastineau's right hand was in his coat pocket. As he took a swift step forward, he withdrew it, his eyes fixed with a peculiar mesmeric gaze upon Herriard's. Something in the look warned Herriard; it was not that of one who is simply giving up a key on demand. But the one man's eyes seemed to hold the other's; only, they drove him, instinctively, to take a step backwards. It was well. For as Herriard put out his hand, Gastineau struck at him, at his heart, and the backward movement caused the blow to fall short by perhaps half an inch. Next instant Herriard with a cry of indignation seized the striking arm and closed with him.

"Ah, murderer! "

Herriard felt a sharp prick at his breast and struggled desperately to keep the deadly hand away. He could not have believed that Gastineau was so strong: his arms, wrists, fingers were like joints of steel; while the spirit that governed their movement, their efforts, with deadly purpose, seemed ten times stronger than his own incentive to self-preservation.

It was that fierce vigour of mind that made the struggle equal; the body that for years had lain half dead a match now for a younger man who had never known ill-health. And to Herriard the wrestle was complicated by reason of the sharp weapon that each man was trying to force in an opposite direction; all Gastineau's vicious energy was concentrated towards getting his right hand free to strike. It was a strange encounter, carried on, fierce as it was, almost without noise: indeed there was none, save the heavy breathing of the two adversaries. By sheer weight Gastineau had been forced to the wall, against which he was held struggling quietly with a planned reason for every movement he made. With him was no waste of energy; only against Herriard's greater strength he could not work his will. But on Herriard's part the struggle, fierce in its terrible intensity, was but a mechanical effort at self-defence. What was to be the end of it? What did it, must it, portend? If, that was, he got the better of his enemy; if it went the other way, the end was certain enough. In a few minutes he would be a dead man, and no soul on earth the wiser as to whence his death-blow had come. There were but the muscles of his arm between him and extinction. The thought nerved him; he tightened his grip on Gastineau, casting about for an effectual means of wresting from him the weapon, a long, tapering stilletto, used for piercing documents, which had lain on the writing table. It seemed as though, if he tried, he could turn it and drive it into the evil heart, to the world's advantage. If it came to that——

Suddenly Gastineau seemed to collapse, the tension of his muscles relaxed, his legs gave way, Herriard was supporting rather than restraining him now. There was a strange, fixed, unfathomable expression in Gastineau's eyes as he hung forwards, helplessly, it seemed: only held up by Herriard's grip. He could have sent him out of the world then; and just because he realized how easy it would be, he put away the intention. Indeed, as Gastineau's limp weight lurched forward against him, his head hanging down, Herriard asked himself whether nature were not about to take a desirable, if unpleasant, task, out of human hands.

So he let Gastineau slip to the floor, and, as he lay, tried once more to take the deadly point from him. But the grasp of the fingers round it was as rigid as that of a dead hand. Still holding the wrist, Herriard paused in perplexity. What was he to do? how was this affair to end?

"Gastineau," he exclaimed, "let go; give up this thing."

The words were futile; the white face on the floor gave no sign that they were heard; the fist remained clenched tightly as ever round the weapon's handle. Gastineau was breathing heavily, peculiarly, at considerable intervals, sighing rather than simply breathing: his eyes, half closed, seemed to see nothing. In a tense, horrible silence, broken only by an occasional deep breath from Gastineau, the moments passed without bringing relief to Herriard's situation, or suggesting an end to the affair, save one. Was the man dying? It seemed almost like it. His breathing, to Herriard's untrained ear, seemed stertorous; and now and again there came a catch and a rattle in the throat. The man was dying. His patched-up strength had evidently given way under the strain: the mind had urged on the body beyond its half-recovered powers, and the result was the collapse before him.

"Gastineau!"

For a moment Herriard forgot his enemy's diabolical nature in the feeling of almost awe-struck sorrow for the man who had led him to success. That the end of it all should have come thus swiftly and awfully filled him with a vague terror.

"Gastineau!"

The body before him quivered; he thought the thin lips, almost set, murmured something. Changing his position, he bent over, and set himself to raise the fallen head. As he did so, a rigor seemed to seize and shake Gastineau; he groaned feebly and caught his breath: it seemed as though the end was near. Near? Herriard, relaxing something of his grasp, bent down to hear what the lips seemed to murmur. Then he found an arm holding his neck like in a vice, his head was pulled down, the wrist which he gripped was jerked free, and, with a convulsive, concentrated muscular effort, Gastineau raised himself and held him down. The relative positions of the two men had in a moment become reversed, and Herriard was looking up into the face set over him full of the triumph of a diabolical cunning.

"My good Herriard," said the scoffing voice through the curl of those hateful lips, "you are hopelessly stupid. What did you think? That you could snuff out Paul Gastineau by holding him against the wall?" He laughed. Herriard saw the glint of the steel raised to strike. He had no breath to struggle; the tense, cruel fingers gripped his throat mercilessly, the weight of Gastineau's body was on his chest.

"Gastineau, for God's sake——" he gasped, and all the reply was a laugh.

"So you know I did for Martindale," he heard the words through the buzzing of the compressed blood in his ears. "Dangerous knowledge. Too dangerous to live."

Gastineau moved slightly backward to strike. Herriard gave a stifled cry in the agony of death. Then through the rooms there sounded the startling noise of a sharp knocking at the outer door.

With every sense strung to its acutest point, Herriard heard it and made a desperate effort to call out; but the hand on his throat tightened, and the cry was abortive. Then, for a few seconds, dead silence followed. Gastineau was thinking, planning with that swift brain of his; determining which course to take of the urgent choice before him. Life and death were in the wavering balance, and Herriard lay watching the cruel face as the indicator of which side the scale of his existence dropped. Then came another knocking, and Herriard with a tremendous effort partially freed himself and sent forth a great half-strangled cry. Next instant he was released, for Gastineau had sprung to his feet, and stood for the moment irresolute. Herriard rose now, and shouted; what he knew not. But the shout seemed to determine Gastineau. He took the key from his pocket, unlocked the door and went out. Herriard, steadying himself, followed warily into the lobby. Gastineau was not to be seen. The outer door stood ajar. It opened wider now to admit a man's form. Herriard sprang forward with a cry, and, to his inexpressible relief, found himself confronted by Count Prosper von Rohnburg.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE WAYS OF MAYFAIR

"THEY say," announced Dormer Greetland, with the seriousness befitting an important pronouncement, "that Countess Alexia is going to marry Herriard."

"One is scarcely surprised to hear it," Lady Rotherfield commented in a non-committal tone. Having once got down on the wrong side of the fence, she had climbed up again to her perch, and was disposed to sit there and argue that her rash descent had not been altogether unwise. "But is it true?"

"Quite proper," laughed the shrill voice of Baron de Daun, "that Perseus should marry Andromeda. It is true? Of course it is the natural thing for people to say."

"I have it on the best authority," was the Mayfair newsman's somewhat vague reply. "Naturally it was the first thing we should be told. But one would hardly accept the banal chatter of irresponsible outsiders. No, dear lady, you will find it authentic now. I might have told you the news a fortnight ago, but then it was merely in the air. To-day——" He gave a shrug as though they would discredit his imprimatur at their peril.

"Well, I should say there is something in it," Sir Perrott Aspall declared. "I was talking to Dick Josselyn at the Club just now, and he tells me that Herriard is returning all his briefs."

"Really?" exclaimed Lady Rotherfield, trying to gauge the significance of the last piece of news.

"That looks as though something were in the wind," De Daun suggested.

"Yes," put in Greetland. "Herriard would n't accept a brief for poor Lady Ranower. She had set her heart upon retaining him for her appeal." This was pure invention; but its author could not have it supposed that Sir Perrott's announcement was news to him.

"I suppose it will be a quiet affair?" Lady Rotherfield was alluding to Alexia's marriage, not to Lady Ranower's appeal.

"I should hope so," Greetland replied charitably. "Between ourselves, one can scarcely call the Countess quite re-established."

"Ah, well," observed Lady Rotherfield, still hedging, "a very suitable match. Mr. Herriard is quite a somebody."

"Oh, yes," said De Daun, who had taken recent opportunities of cultivating Herriard on the strength of his coming position in the world. "But why should he return his briefs, eh? Is that the fashion here when one is to be married?"

"Hardly," laughed Sir Perrott. "Unless one is in a great hurry."

"Ah, that is it, you may depend," said Greetland. "It is coming off at once. By to-night I shall know all about it. A long honeymoon to wear out an attenuating scandal."

"I wish," said Lady Rotherfield presently to Greetland in a confidential corner, "one knew exactly what to do about poor Countess Alexia. It is so very awkward. What line are people taking? Do advise me."

"Lady Kilvinton calls," the smart authority declared, somewhat with the air of a dogmatic stockbroker advising a client as to her investments. "And yesterday when I was in Green Street I saw two carriages outside the house. I was on the other side, but I think—I 'm pretty sure—the Ramplingham crest was on one of them."

"H'm!" Lady Rotherfield pursed her lips meditatively. "You don't go there yourself?" she asked shrewdly.

He shrugged. "I have n't had a moment to go anywhere, except where I have been booked; and then, as it is, have been able to keep only half my engagements," he replied, with weary plausibility. "You know, dear lady, what a rush there always is towards the end of the season. Oh, no; I don't mean to drop the von Rohnburgs. Count Prosper is a very decent fellow; and I always liked Lady Alexia. She is so interesting, and her breeding is perfect, which is more than one can say for all foreigners. That appalling Lady Beeman, for instance, *née* Goldknecht, who, I should say, came out of the Judengasse originally. No; when one comes back from Homburg and the country-house round, which, by the way, promises to be severely trying this autumn, I shall certainly give our friends in Green Street a call. They will hardly expect a busy man to do more this side of November than leave a card."

"Then you think," Lady Rotherfield said, with a certain clearing of doubt, "that one may venture to take them up again?"

"I see no risk now, dear lady, or I would not let you do it," the cotillon-expert assured her, this time with the air of a doctor pronouncing a patient at last free from infection. "You see, Herriard is bound to come on; he is quite pointed out and listened to in the House; and the Countess is bound to have a large *dot.* Yes; they will have to be reckoned with when they have settled down, and the nine days' wonder is conveniently forgotten. With her style and *nous* theirs is quite likely to be one of the smart houses to go to, and if he got to the front Bench her receptions might attain the dignity of a *salon.*"

Lady Rotherfield was beginning to wonder whether she had not sat too long on the fence. "You really think that?" she murmured uncomfortably. Then went on almost beseechingly, "Mr. Greetland, you know one hates to do the wrong thing. Do you think it would look odd if one sent these dear people a card for next Tuesday? You know I am having some music; Marzoni has promised to sing, and I am trying to get Tarbosch; only these tiresome musical people give themselves such provoking airs. Is it too late?"

Greetland appeared to reflect. "H'm! How long have the cards been out?"

"Nearly a month," the lady answered, with a little rueful grimace. "One has to make refusals as difficult as possible in these days of competition."

"Just so," Greetland assented. "Poor Mrs. Pelham Steinthal never sends her cards out less than six weeks ahead."

"Naturally. A deplorable woman like that. I'm afraid even that precaution does not prevent the refusals."

"No. But if she gets one acceptance in eight she considers she has done extremely well. And the poor woman is really improving. I have edited her list for her."

"A pleasant task! But you are always so sweet."

"It was a labour of Hercules; especially as one had never heard of quite two-thirds of the people; and when I enquired who in the world they were, the tiresome woman would hold a brief for the distressing unknowns."

"She might have concluded," observed Lady Rotherfield graciously, "that any one unknown to Mr. Dormer Greetland was not worth knowing."

The arbiter of social pretension accepted the compliment as no more than his due. "Well, I had at last to act on that assumption," he said acquiescently. "Arguing the value of various unknown quantities became fatiguing. It took me quite half-an-hour's hard lecturing to make the absurd woman understand that a merely rich hostess, to be a success, must never receive any but her social superiors. Equals and inferiors in such a case give away the show at once."

"Ah, yes," Lady Rotherfield agreed, with a half sigh; "people of that sort cannot be too careful. Unfortunately they will not realize the fact that it is as much as we can do to tolerate them singly; in battalions they are utterly overpowering. Now, Mr. Greetland, about the poor Countess Alexia. Do you think one might venture?"

With a slightly obvious effort Greetland brought his mind back to the subject from which it had strayed. "Well," he said judicially, "I think you might. You must chance their not having heard of your reception, with other things to occupy their minds. You might scribble an excuse for short notice; say you have had unheard-of difficulties with your fiddler."

"Oh, thank you so much, dear Mr. Greetland; it is truly sweet of you. I 'll do that at once. Yes; these wretched fiddlers and their exasperating ways have their uses sometimes. I hope you are coming, Mr. Greetland? "

A cloud crossed the face which was to so many hostesses the social sun. "I am engaged a hundred deep for Tuesday," he smiled protestingly, "but I 'll do my best. You might let me know, dear lady, if Tarbosch is really coming to play for you. I just missed him at Lady Llanthony's the other night, and one must be able to say one has heard him."

"I 'll make the wretch decide, and then send you a wire," she promised.

Greetland rose. He had given Lady Rotherfield more of the light of his complacent countenance than was quite her due, and should be moving round in his orbit to illuminate and attract the rest of the world. A man passed him with a nod and a casual remark. Greetland turned back to Lady Rotherfield.

"Talking of our friends in Green Street," he said, "that man has been having an uncomfortable time over the Vaux House affair."

"He? Who? " the lady asked, putting up her glasses.

Greetland looked up at her with a suspicion of pitying contempt. Really she was, considering her position, very stupid and ill-informed. He had indeed been wasting his time with her, and made a mental note that he would try and hear Tarbosch somewhere else than under her irritating auspices.

"Don't you know? " he asked, almost tartly. "Aubrey Playford. It is an open secret that he denounced the Countess Alexia to the *Daily Comet.* Had recognized the dagger hair-pin as being hers, and so got them into all this trouble. They say he and Brailsford nearly came to blows in the Park last Sunday over the affair. Of course Brailsford is trying to whitewash himself with the mob, and particularly to get back into certain houses where he is no longer asked. They say old Lord Clovelly threatened to kick him into Piccadilly if he showed his face at Bude House again. So he thought the best move would be to horsewhip Playford, just to show his *bona fides.*"

"How amusing!" Lady Rotherfield made a mental tick against that enterprising editor's name. "But, tell me, why did Mr. Playford accuse the poor Countess Alexia?"

Greetland smiled significantly. "Surely you can guess the reason, dear lady," he replied, with a trace of impatience. "No need to *chercher la femme* when she is already there."

"Ah, just so. A case of pique. But what bad form."

"So every one thinks."

"I believe I have asked him for Tuesday. How awkward! Still, he is here. I always thought Lady Polloxfen so particular."

Greetland gave a smile of superior insight. "So she is, dear lady; but you must remember that Aubrey Playford is heir presumptive to his cousin's title, and the Stainford property is practically bound to go with it."

"To be sure!" Lady Rotherfield's brow cleared once more. And presently when, by accident or design, she encountered that eligible sneak, she begged him with her sweetest smile not to forget he was engaged to her for Tuesday when that delightful Tarbosch was positively going to play.

CHAPTER XXIV

HERRIARD'S CONFESSION

THE gossips for once were right about Herriard and Countess Alexia. They were going to be married almost immediately, and with a view to that event Herriard was preparing to interrupt his work at the Bar. Whither his position was drifting him he knew not: the developments directed by the inscrutable brain of a Gastineau were not to be forecasted. But, at least, if his career was checked, he would now be pecuniarily independent of briefs.

When, on the night of his terrible danger, he found with a great thrill of relief that his opportune visitor was Count Prosper, he invited him, in a half-dazed fashion, into his room, making what excuse of illness he could to account for his perturbed and disordered appearance. His explanations were suspiciously incoherent, for his mind was preoccupied with the problem as to what prompt action, if any, he ought to take with regard to Gastineau. But his visitor was an easy-going fellow; not given, at any rate outside his profession, to probing for recondite motives; and although he regarded Herriard's confusion and disarray with a certain amount of wondering curiosity, he yet accepted the sight as a mere abnormality with which he did not happen to be familiar.

"I wondered what was the matter," he laughed, "when I found you had opened the door and then disappeared."

So Gastineau had not passed out. He was still in the chambers. Herriard could not, for his life, determine what he had best do.

"I had to go into the City to our Consulate," Count Prosper proceeded chattily. "I was kept there late over some troublesome business, and one of the men took me to dine at some famous old eating-house. Strolling homewards, I passed the Temple and thought to see if you were to be still found in your den."

"I am glad you did," was Herriard's fervent response.

"Are you hard at work? " the Count went on. "No. You cannot work with a bad headache. Let us take a hansom home and blow it away. Alexia is alone, and dull enough, I expect. Come! "

He rose with a smile, and laid his hand affectionately on the other's shoulder.

"Yes," answered Herriard, feeling that, though unseasonable, it was the only thing possible. "I shall be glad, if you will wait till I make myself tidy."

He went out warily into the lobby. The outer door was ajar. He tried to recollect. "Prosper," he said, returning to the room, "do you remember whether I shut the outside door when you came in? "

"No, my dear fellow," he laughed. "I performed that office myself."

"You are sure? "

"Quite positive."

So Gastineau was gone. The open door showed that. Yet it was with an apprehensive watchfulness that Herriard entered the little dressing-room where his enemy must have waited. He was not there now. He had disappeared; gone out upon the world an impersonal force for evil, a living man with, for the time, no legal existence.

The relief from the close, baleful atmosphere of the chambers and the drive through the comparatively fresh air somewhat revived Herriard, and by the time they reached Green Street he had resolved upon the course he would take. Alexia was alone; how glad she was to see him the love-light in her eyes told him, and his heart sank, he felt bitterly resentful against fate at the thought of the evil of which he was the messenger. Count Prosper was not long in tactfully remembering some work he had to finish, and left the lovers together.

"Geoffrey," Alexia said, looking into the face just raised from a kiss, "you are not yourself to-night, you are troubled: tell me."

He took a few restless steps. "I am worried," he answered, "and more, I have news which must trouble you."

She rose to her feet and stood looking at him, her eyes full of a vague apprehension, yet scarcely fear. "Geoffrey," she said in a low, steady voice, "tell me: tell me at once."

He hestitated a moment as though calculating the danger of the shock. Then he spoke.

"Paul Gastineau——"

"Gastineau?" She almost gasped, and her face went white.

"Is alive."

"Ah!" Her lips closed tightly. The effort was to steady herself and realize what the news portended. With characteristic delicacy Herriard waited in silence.

In that moment he would not emphasize, he dared not soften, the import of the news.

"You have seen him? " she asked at length.

He nodded. Then came near, took her in his arms and kissed her. "My darling! Mine! " he murmured.

"Geoffrey, tell me," she said.

"I hardly dare tell you," he replied, as the possible consequence of his confession sent a shiver of fear through him.

"Ah, he is the same terribly hateful, determined man as ever." She gave a slight shudder. "So the man who told Prosper he had seen him was right after all. But you, Geoffrey; how did you encounter him? You said you did not know him in the old days, before his supposed death. Tell me quickly. I cannot understand what has happened."

He took her hand as they sat together. "I don't know how I can tell you," he said, in a troubled voice. "For my story involves a confession; a hateful confession which may rob me of the thing I hold dearest in the world. Yet I must tell you everything, everything, and trust to your nobleness, to your love to judge me fairly. Promise me you will not condemn me till you have heard the whole history. I swear to you I will keep back nothing, extenuate nothing: you shall know the story as I know it."

The hand which lay in his gave a little pressure of confidence, and with that he released it. At least he would spare her—and himself—the pain of taking it away. Then he told her everything of his life since his first meeting with Gastineau: told his story shortly, succinctly, yet, as he had promised, omitting nothing of importance, nothing that an enemy or his own conscience would have bade him tell. Alexia listened with half-averted face. Now and again she broke in with an exclamation of wonder, for the tale was surely one of the strangest that ever woman heard from her lover's lips; once or twice she asked a question for an explanation of Gastineau's almost incredible procedure; that was all. She heard him without sign of impatience to the end, and he could not tell, dared not seek to anticipate his story's effect upon her. Yet he feared. The account of the accident, their meeting, and the supposititious death of Gastineau was plain, though dramatic enough; the suggestion of the singular partnership did not seem greatly to exceed the relations of coach and pupil; but, viewed in the light of its effects, of the moral situation to which it had driven Herriard, of the vindictive use to which Gastineau had constantly put his pupil, of the fraud and falsehood that lay behind Herriard's career, none the less dishonest in that their only bad effect was the injury to himself, all this when related plainly seemed horribly condemnatory. Still, he stuck unflinchingly to his task, feeling that nothing but truth must exist between him and his love; and, besides, this was the only, yet the least, atonement he could make.

It was only when he had come to an end of his unvarnished story that he let his tone change to pleading.

"If you knew, my love," he said, passionately remorseful, "how I have hated myself for these years of falsehood, how I fought against the temptation to declare my love, knowing I was unworthy of yours, till at last it was too strong to resist, you would pity me. And you must know that with my love came the determination to end the situation regardless of consequences, to strip off the bonds of deception that bound me. The release has come, thank God, and I am a free man, and you are, if it must be, a free woman, whose path need never run with mine again."

He paused, hanging on her answer. To his unspeakable joy her hand was laid on his, and, as he turned, he read nothing but love in her eyes.

"Alexia!" he cried, in the delicious release from a great fear; and next moment was on his knees by her side kissing her. "And you can still love me?" he murmured.

"Why not?" she replied. "What bar is it between us that you have been led into and caught in a false position by the most plausible, unprincipled brain in the world?"

"But the living lie that I have been," he urged, resolved that nothing should be glossed over, and feeling a prompt forgiveness was more than he deserved.

She gave a smile of sweet protest. "That is hardly my judgment of you. It does not follow because Geoffrey Herriard is, happily, not the intellectual equal of Paul Gastineau he is not a clever man."

"At least," he said, allowing himself one favourable word, "my conduct of your case was all my own."

"I gathered that," she replied, "from your story, and was glad to think it."

"If," he continued, with a touch of bitterness, "it had been he who, through my mouth, had won the day for you, I don't think I could ever have brought myself to ask you to be my wife. But at least I was honest there."

"And clever, and brave, and chivalrous. And you thought, Geoffrey, that the woman who professed to love you would have repaid all that by rejecting you because she found you were enmeshed in the toils of our common enemy? You might have known me better, dear."

Presently Herriard said, "I have at least one great piece of good news for you. The man who killed Martindale has been discovered."

"Geoffrey!" Alexia's face flushed with the joy of that relief. "Tell me; who——"

"Who but the one man in our thoughts, the man whose evil personality hangs like a thunder-cloud over our lives."

"Not Gastineau?"

"Yes; Paul Gastineau." Then he told her of Quickjohn's discovery, and of Gastineau's visit and attack; softening, however, the details of that terrible struggle, in order to spare her anxiety and fear for the future. As it was, she showed signs of a distress and a terror too strong to be kept under.

"But now," she said, brightening a little, "with this man's discovery, Gastineau's power for evil is surely at an end? You have only to inform the authorities that he is alive, and they will arrest him."

Herriard shook his head. "I doubt if they would have a case. My experience of the law, my working with Gastineau, have taught me that moral proof positive may fall very far short of the legal evidence necessary for a successful prosecution. No: it is quite convincing to us—to you, to me and Quickjohn; but, I fear, it is a noose that a less clever man than Paul Gastineau would have little difficulty in slipping out of. No one knows what happened in that room between the time of your leaving it and the discovery of Martindale's death, except the one man whom we believed to have killed him."

"And he would kill you, Geoffrey," she said, in terror at the thought.

He shook his head reassuringly. "I think not," he said. "For one thing, I am on my guard and can take care of myself, and, besides, I do not think he will attempt to attack me again. He knows I can, at least, invoke the aid of the law there, and he would scarcely care, in his present position, to run that risk."

Alexia seemed to take comfort from his assumption of confidence. He knew, however, all the same, that nothing was more likely than that Gastineau was meditating another attack, and that his own life, except as far as he could protect it, might scarcely be worth a day's purchase.

Herriard, feeling in little humour for his own company that night, was glad to sit and smoke with Count Prosper till a late hour. It had been arranged before Alexia had left them that the marriage should take place almost immediately and that a long honeymoon should be spent on the Count's estate in Moravia. One thing intervened, and that was an engagement Herriard had made to give his annual address to his constituents at Bradbury. This was an annoying hindrance, but it was a binding obligation on Herriard, and, after all, it meant but a week's extra delay, which would give little more time than was needed for him to make a temporary wind-up of his business, legal and parliamentary. With the deadly point hanging over him, however, every moment seemed to count now against the chance of finally securing his happiness: to his impatience already, even, the inevitable interval seemed a gulf that he could scarcely hope to cross.

However, their plans were, so far, settled satisfactorily, even happily. Count Prosper gave his guest a glowing account of his Austrian home, with the promise of much romantic scenery and good sport. At length Herriard bade him good-night and strolled off towards his rooms, his mind a vortex of doubt, of joy, of fear. What would be Gastineau's next move? He had declared in his masterful fashion that he would not be robbed of that treasure which was never his, Alexia. Still, with a man of Gastineau's resource and strength of will to covet was to possess. In the days of their partnership, now, it seemed, an age back, he had often declared that to a man of abnormal will-power, once in deadly earnest, to desire was to have; whatever the object to be attained might be, however high it might seem above his reach. And that force was working now against him; what could his own devoted love count in opposition to the tremendous energy of that tenacious, unconquerable will?

Depressed with these thoughts, he had reached his door, when a man suddenly emerging from the shadow of a portico confronted him. He was sure, before he recognized him, that it was the man in his thoughts, Paul Gastineau. Happily he had taken the precaution to borrow, on a plausible excuse, Count Prosper's revolver, resolving to buy one for himself next day. At the sight of Gastineau he whipped it out and held it outstretched before him. Gastineau laughed. As the light of a street lamp fell on his face he seemed in quite a pleasant, even jocular, mood; no trace remained of the devilish countenance that had looked down at Herriard a few hours before with murder written plain upon it. Now the smile was not even cynical.

"My dear Geoffrey," he exclaimed, "please don't be so truculent. I hope we have both recovered from our late madness. I have been waiting for you here, having forfeited the right to expect you to receive me indoors."

"You could hardly expect that," replied Herriard, regarding with repugnant wonder the almost incredible assurance of the callous, insouciant incarnation of malignity who stood smiling before him. "I wish to have nothing more to say to you."

"Naturally," Gastineau laughed. "All the same I shall be obliged if you will listen to a word from me. A question. Are you going to mention our late unfortunate set-to to your friend Quickjohn? I ask merely for information." He spoke quite casually, as though careless what the answer might be.

"I have not thought of it."

"Ah!" Gastineau exclaimed, with a smile of patronizing doubt. "Or that I am in the land of the living?"

"Nor that, as yet."

"Ah! Now, my dear Herriard," he went on in his easy tone, with just a suspicion of restrained mockery behind it, "I don't expect you to take advice from me any longer, and I am perfectly ready to meet any contingency; at the same time I am here to offer you—shall we say an armistice?—and to suggest that to make a fuss about my little explosion of temper would not be a wise thing to do."

"I suppose that is a threat," Herriard said sternly; "if so——"

"A threat?" Gastineau raised a deprecating hand. "My dear fellow! The idea of threatening an angry man who stands over you with a loaded—presumably loaded—revolver in his hand! It is nothing but a piece of common-sense advice, of which the most cocksure of us occasionally stand in need. Perhaps I ought to explain why mine is worth considering; the question, that is, of leaving well—or ill—alone."

"I don't want your advice, Gastineau, of all men's," Herriard said.

"And yet," the other retorted, gently persuasive, "I am, so far, the only man capable of giving advice in the present crisis. You had better hear what I have to say. Please be careful of that revolver. If you mean to shoot, shoot; but I should hate to have an accidental bullet through me. Now, the world, my dear Herriard, is, putting aside for the moment our little difference, wide enough for both of us. It is not likely that I shall come back to that stuffy, crowded square mile on which I formerly and you lately have bustled and quibbled and sweated. I have lost nearly five working years of my life; I must make them up, and the great West, my dear Geoffrey, offers me the best chance of overtaking them. There is a fortune for me in five years over there. And the American intellect attracts me; I long to pit myself against it; I have never been fully extended here; was brought into the world for worthier competitors than your slow, stupid Englishmen; I 'm sick of fighting rapier against bludgeon. So, as at present advised, I am off."

Herriard bowed acceptance of the statement.

"I thought you might like to know," Gastineau went on lightly. "No doubt you regard me as a dangerous element in your atmosphere; an active enemy, eh? Well, perhaps I might be if it were worth my while; but five minutes' reflection will surely show you that it is n't. That 's all. Good-night."

To Herriard's relief he turned to go; then stopped. "By the way, as we are not likely to meet again, you are still bent on marrying the lady?"

"Certainly," Herriard answered curtly.

"H'm! A mistake, my dear friend, and a mistake that will probably make all the difference. Blind obstinacy has led many a better man than you or I over a precipice. The clever man is he who knows when to abandon an untenable or dangerous position. Well, may you be wise before wisdom has gone beyond recall. I shall say no more. For the last time, good-night and good-bye."

He nodded, indifferent as to whether his bidding were returned, and so went off at a saunter down the street. Herriard lingered in the shadow of his doorway, watching him till he had disappeared into the night.

CHAPTER XXV

A RIOT

ON the appointed day Herriard journeyed down to address his constituents at Bradbury. Since their meeting in Mount Street, he had seen or heard nothing of Gastineau. He had, however, kept on his guard through the busy days that followed, being too wary and too suspicious of Gastineau's methods to be lulled into the belief that the active will was not still working against him. Nevertheless, as the days went by without a sign of Gastineau, or a suggestion of his aggressive enmity, days which brought him nearer and nearer to that supreme hour to which he scarcely dared look forward, his mind grew easier, and he found himself entertaining the hope that, after all, his enemy might, in his speech with him in the gate, have declared his real intentions, and that he would be troubled by him no more. Gastineau's declared project of betaking himself to America was, at least, reasonable and likely enough. He had in the old days over and over again expressed his utter contempt for his English compeers, and told how, in his active life, he had longed for adversaries more worthy of his skill in fence. Then, allowing it to be quite possible that, with the memory of his former reputation, with his talent and determination, it would be a comparatively easy task for him to push himself again into the foremost place which he had once occupied, he would probably be withheld by the consideration that it might be now as a man under the cloud of a dark suspicion that he would stand forth. It was hardly to be supposed that Quickjohn's theory would be allowed to slumber in silence. No; Paul Gastineau was assuredly too astute and too clear-sighted a man not to see that a second career in England was closed to him. His having lain for years *perdu* under an assumed name, having allowed the false report of his death to pass uncontradicted, would be in itself a salient cause of suspicion. Englishmen have ever fought shy, in public life at least, of men whose record was smirched with doubt. Few men, if any, have succeeded in living down an ugly scandal to the extent of gaining unreserved acceptance in a public career. Whatever the private lives of the units of out-door opinion may be, they are at least jealous of crooked ways leading to high places.

Reasoning thus, Herriard allowed his uneasiness to diminish, and, as the time of his marriage drew near, was able to indulge in a certain sense of happiness and security. It was in this mood that on the day appointed for his speech he journeyed down to Bradbury. On his arrival he had a good deal of business to get through with his agent and principal supporters, and this kept his mind so occupied that he gave scarcely a thought to the more momentous issues which he had left behind in town. He was, however, brought back to them in somewhat startling fashion when, on driving from his hotel to the hall where the meeting was to be held, he caught sight of a face, which was uncomfortably familiar to him, that of Hencher, Gastineau's confidential body servant. But, after the first start it gave him, the idea of the man's being there seemed so unlikely, and even preposterous, that he told himself he must have made a mistake; the Gastineau business was on his nerves, and had made him recognize Hencher in a somewhat similar-looking local man. Still, knowing Gastineau, and the subtle, enterprising methods of his vindictiveness, the idea gave him recurrent disquietude, and, try as he would, he could not dismiss from his mind the possibility that the man he had seen was really Hencher, and that his presence there foreboded mischief.

Up to the opening of the proceedings there had been no hint or idea of opposition, but soon after the business had commenced it became apparent that there was what seemed an organized band of malcontents in the body of the hall who meant to take every opportunity of interrupting the speeches. This opposition manifested itself unmistakably when Herriard rose to give his address, and as he proceeded the noise and interruptions grew more insistent. The chairman was powerless to preserve order, and, as the organizers of the meeting had anticipated no sort of disturbance, they had taken no pains to provide against such a contingency. There were a number of ill-looking fellows distributed about the hall who kept a running fire of interruptions; as soon as one set was silenced, the game was taken up by others in a different quarter. At last the disturbance reached such a pitch that Herriard was unable to make himself heard, and to continue speaking was clearly futile. At this juncture two or three stray policemen were brought in with the object of ejecting, or, at least, overawing, the rowdy element. It, however, proved to be the means of bringing the uproar to a climax. A provincial policeman is usually only in a limited and constructive sense typical of the Law. These poor men, received with a derisive roar, stood looking rather foolish and conspicuously incompetent to deal with the situation. The disturbers of the meeting rose at them with defiance and threats, also with chaff of an aggressively personal nature. In the midst of all this the purpose of the meeting, which was Herriard's address, became a thing of naught; so he and his supporters on the platform sat down to await the result of the row in more or less patient helplessness.

Suddenly a whistle sounded through the hall, and with an ominously threatening cry the malcontents in all parts of the audience turned and began to fight their way towards the platform.

"Look out! They are going to storm us!" cried the chairman, a pompous linen-draper and former mayor, who in days of calm was wont to consider himself the ruling spirit of the town. "We had better take care of ourselves and our hats," he added with a ghastly attempt at jocularity and self-possession. His pomposity had gone like the gas in a burst balloon; he was in an abject state of terror, and incapable of making a dignified retreat. All the idea he now retained of his position as chairman was that it gave him an excuse for leading the way; so, although there were ladies on the platform, he pushed through them with a quavering, "Follow me!" and hurried off. Herriard stood facing the storming party, and looking on with disgust at the free fight now raging in the body of the hall. But the struggle was unequal, the well-disposed members of the audience, although in the majority, were no match for the rowdy element of roughs and, it seemed, hired bullies. The outwork of the reporters' table was stormed;

from that it was but an easy leap to the platform where Herriard still stood defiantly.

A man touched his arm, one of the more plucky among the officials. "Come away, Mr. Herriard, quick! You can do no good by remaining here. The meeting is thoroughly demoralized. We can do nothing now. It is all over."

Reluctantly, with the annoying sense of a wasted effort and lost days, Herriard turned and let himself be hurried from the platform just as a savage cry of exultation announced that the foremost of the attacking party had gained a footing on it. In the ante-room he was met by Mr. Rigglesden, his chairman, coming back with a white face.

"We are cut off," he exclaimed, shaking with fear. "The street outside is full of the blackguards. We are in a trap."

"Nonsense," said Herriard impatiently, as he pushed past the abject local worthy. "Let me speak to them; I 'll bring them to their senses."

"No use," groaned the quondam mayor. "I know our Bradbury rowdies. They are terrors when their blood 's up, and have no senses to be brought back to. Mr. Carter and gentlemen, for Heaven's sake keep that door. To let them in from the hall will be as much as our lives are worth."

For the man who had brought Herriard from the platform was, with three other young fellows, holding the door that led down from the platform against the savage efforts that were being made to force it open.

Meanwhile Herriard had pushed his way through the frightened group to the outer door. He made its custodian unlock it, and so, passing through, he presented himself before the vicious mob outside. His appearance was the signal for a shout and an ugly rush. He tried to speak, but his voice was drowned by the howls, and he was forced back into the doorway by the assault. Blows were aimed at him, and he saw that reasoning was futile and courage of no avail against what was clearly an organized attack. So he retreated, and then engaged with his supporters in a struggle to hold the door against the crowd which were flinging themselves against it. In the midst of this fierce effort, mingled cries of terror and triumph behind them told that the inner door from the hall had at length been forced and that the roughs were streaming into the ante-room. The cries increased to shrieks and shouts, the crush became terrible, but through it the ruffians were successfully forcing their way to the outer door. Herriard, hemmed in, turned and hit out desperately. "Down him!" came a cry. Next moment an arm encircled his throat from behind. By an effort he half turned, ducked, and freed himself from the clutch. But as he raised his head again he received a heavy blow on it and dropped senseless to the floor.

CHAPTER XXVI

ALEXIA'S VISITOR

ON that same evening in London it was announced to Countess Alexia that a Mr. Maxton was in the morning-room waiting to see her on urgent business. Her brother was not at home, being away at a diplomatic function. Alexia had dined alone and was now busy answering a batch of letters of congratulation which the news of her approaching marriage had brought. She sent down a request to know on what business so late a visitor wished to see her, and word was brought back that it concerned Mr. Herriard and was most urgent. Not satisfied with that reply and beginning to be vaguely suspicious, Alexia sent to say that she was busy and would be glad if Mr. Maxton would give her in writing a more definite idea of what he wished to say. In a few minutes the suggested note was handed to her. She opened it with some apprehension. It consisted of but two lines. "Mr. Herriard has met with a serious accident at Bradbury."

Fighting against the faintness that came over her as she realized instantly that the news might be but half told, she said she would see the visitor, and, after a few moments of sickening fear, nerving herself bravely to hear the worst, she went down to the room where the messenger of evil waited.

As she entered, the man was standing with his back to the door, scrutinizing a picture. It was not till

Alexia had come some way into the room that he turned, and with a thrill more of disgust than fear she recognized him.

"Mr. Gastineau! "

He smiled and took a step towards her, holding out his hand. "Paul Gastineau, Countess, risen from the dead."

She ignored his outstretched hand, affecting to look at his note which she held. "You have come to tell me of Mr. Herriard? " she said, hoping now that the message might have been but a trick to induce her to see him. "He has met with an accident? " she asked, with a touch of incredulity.

Gastineau gave a little sympathetic shrug. "Poor Geoffrey! Yes, I 'm afraid he has had a bad experience. I have had a telegram—you know we have of late been great chums, if not more—a telegram to say the meeting was broken up and Herriard hurt. I thought I could do no less than come round to tell you."

Looking at him steadily, she told herself that he was lying. "You need not have brought the message yourself; you might have sent it," she observed coldly.

He was evidently stung by her tone, for he returned, with a touch of feeling, "In view of the relations which I understand exist between you and Herriard I should scarcely have cared to give you what may prove to be very serious news in an off-hand fashion. I regret that my well-meant errand has met with so ungracious a reception."

"I am sorry to hear that Mr. Herriard has been hurt," Alexia said stiffly. "Is that all? "

"Is it not enough? "

"Quite. I mean, I will not detain you longer."

"One would think, Countess," he said quietly, watching her with probing eyes, "that you were glad, rather than sorry, to hear the bad news."

"You can hardly expect me to discuss with you my feelings on the subject," she returned, with a significant move towards the bell.

He made a swift step forward and intercepted her. "Alexia—Countess," he said, with a note of passion in his voice, "is this my welcome back to life?"

"What other," she asked, coldly as ever, and with a self-possession that hid her knowledge of how critical the interview must be, "could you expect from me?"

"I had hoped," he answered simply, "for one of a very different kind." Then his manner changed abruptly with a bitter exclamation. "Welcome! As though I had not atoned by years of hopeless agony for all the sins of my past! Alexia!" He tried to take her hand: she drew it away with a movement of avoidance.

"No," she said peremptorily; "I forbid you to speak to me like that."

He bowed his head in submission and so hid the baulked devil that shot a blaze into his eyes. "I come back to life and the world to find you as beautiful, as cold, as cruel as ever," he murmured, with schooled humility.

"I cannot listen to you any longer," Alexia said. "Please go."

He was facing her now with a look of fight in his eyes. "My message to you," he protested with quiet insistence, "was two-fold. I warn you, for your own sake and Geoffrey Herriard's, not to dismiss me till you have heard the second part."

She gave a slight sigh of impatience. "If I must listen to you——" And yet she felt that in her mind there was no alternative.

"More depends upon it than you imagine," he replied coolly. "You shall not be kept long; I, too, am busy."

He placed a chair for her, and, with an annoying consciousness of submission, she sat down. A sense of her old fear and dislike of the man was creeping over her, and, giving her greater uneasiness still, the subduing sense of his dominant will. It was fortunate, she thought, that she had to act only on the defensive. Still, it might afford a chance of divining the enemy's tactics.

"I had," he began, as he stood before her in the manifest consciousness of power in will and brain, "to come in here under a false name; not merely because I doubted your receiving me, but because Paul Gastineau is to the world still dead, at least for some time longer. So much for myself; I do not want you, of all women, to think of me as a trickster. Now, to the point of my errand. You are going—you must make allowances for my bluntness, time presses and I am a fighting man rather than a diplomatist,—you are going to marry Geoffrey Herriard, very soon; but sooner or later is immaterial. I have come,—forgive me,—to tell you that you must not marry him."

"Why not?" The question was put quietly. Alexia was surprised at her own self-possession.

Gastineau's eyes seemed to burn upon her now. "Because," he answered steadily, "he has stolen, or, at least, appropriated you from me."

"No, no," she protested, meeting his gaze defiantly. "That is absurd. You have no right to say that."

"Then," he rejoined, with his cunning smile, "because I love you."

"Oh!" Alexia rose with an exclamation of annoyance. "Mr. Gastineau, is that persecution to begin again?"

His face was set with the suggestion of purpose. "There will be no persecution on my part," he replied darkly. "I trust we are respectively too sensible to practise or to court it. All I am here for now is to enlighten you, the woman I love with all my soul and strength, as to the true position in which you stand, in a word, to prevent your taking the shadow for the substance."

"I think I understand you," she returned, with a disdainful coldness which made him rage inwardly, "and can save you the trouble of inflicting upon me a repetition of a story which I have already heard."

"Ah!" He seemed nettled at his forestalling. "So the famous Geoffrey Herriard has been clever enough to see the desirability of making a clean breast of his position before he was found out, and has confessed that his cleverness has been borrowed—like his career—from another man's brains, eh? He has told you?"

"Everything."

Gastineau's face relaxed into a sneering smile. "I am sorry to hear that, since it means that he has broken his word of honour, a solemn promise made to me to whom he owes everything."

"I should think," Alexia said quietly, "his course was justified."

He glanced at her sharply, and saw through her words that she knew all. "No doubt," he rejoined, "he would try to justify it, but we need scarcely stay to argue that point. What I ask you to realize is the fact that you are rejecting the real man in favour of his empty mask."

"I do not accept your estimate of Mr. Herriard," she replied curtly.

He seemed charged with the magnetism of a supreme, coercive will, yet her coldness always held him at bay. He could scarcely hope to argue successfully against that baffling attitude of dislike.

"I wish," he continued, schooling his face and manner to an insinuating humility, "that you would try to find it in your heart to entertain a more favourable estimate of me. Alexia," he went on passionately, tactfully taking no more than a step forward as he saw her shrink from his advance, "let me call you once by that name, if it is the last time; Alexia, why can you not love me? What, in Heaven's name, is the curse upon me that gives hate in return where I have beggared myself for love? Alexia," he urged, with a passion that now was genuine enough, "tell me, as one human soul speaking to another, what there is in me that repels you, you of all women, the last in the world whom I could have imagined rejecting substance for shadow. Tell me, even though it be to my utter despair, tell me the truth, why do you so hate me?"

He was bending forward, his face working, his eyes avidly pleading, his body quivering betwixt infinite desire and intense restraint. Before him Alexia stood like one at bay before a crouching tiger, desperate yet unflinching. Perhaps had she not added the indication of courage to beauty it might have lessened the deadliness of the attack. As it was, she could meet his eyes and answer steadily:

"I never hated you till you began to persecute me——"

"Persecute! " he interrupted her impatiently, almost with temper. "Cannot a man declare his love and do all in his power to get it returned without being called a persecutor? "

"It is at least unchivalrous," she replied, "to try to compel a woman's love. In the old days I could have had none for you. Now it is more than ever impossible."

His face lowered. "Since Herriard appeared on the scene," he said through his teeth. "Herriard, who is my creature, the puppet of my whim, the marionette that, lying on my sick couch, I made to dance to my fancy, and have ended, to my sorrow, by galvanizing into my rival."

He spoke with an intensity of bitterness that seemed to strip naked his jealous, malignant soul. But Alexia appeared to take little heed of the stinging words. "Mr. Herriard," she said coolly, "has little or nothing to do with my feeling towards you."

"No? Then we brush the lay figure aside out of our consideration." He accompanied the words with a contemptuous sweep of the arm. "At least," he continued, "I am glad you realize that a mere speaking puppet has no right to stand between intellects like yours and mine. Now, tell me, what have I done to stand worse with you now than in the old days? "

"You have slandered me, Mr. Gastineau," she answered steadily.

He made a gesture of making light of a charge not worth denying. "To the doll, to the child, to keep him from meddling with what was meant for his betters, as we keep a baby's hands off a valuable ornament by saying it will bite him. Surely my presence here, the words I have spoken to you, give the lie to the idea that I could ever believe ill of you."

"To my mind," she retorted, "your slander, of all men's, gives the lie to what you have forced me to listen to to-night."

A curious change swept over his face. He had realized, even before she did, the half-thought that was suggested by and lay behind her words.

"You are quite right," he returned, with a strange calming of the passion that had seemed to rage within him. "Your reproach had more justice in it than you, possibly, imagine. I should have been the last man to accuse you even by innuendo. But I was desperate, a cripple, helpless and, at that time, hopeless. My love made me mad with jealousy, and it is the curse of jealousy that it can be cruel even to the thing it loves. To think that a feather of my own disabled wing had plumed the shaft that had struck my heart—yes, Alexia, I must have been mad, or I could never have breathed a suggestion against the woman whom I love beyond the power of all words to tell."

"And whose offence, whose provocation in your eyes are that she can never return the feeling," she said with quiet firmness.

He bowed his head, strangely submissive. "I do not despair," he replied, in a low voice. "I cannot. Despair would mean death, and life is strong within me; only less strong than my love. That I have laid at your feet, only to be accepted with hate and distrust. I will prove my sincerity. I will put the other, my life, into your keeping. Then you will have all I have, since, with my love, my very soul and spirit are yours. Alexia, I give my life into your hands."

He paused; and the silence lasted till she was forced to ask, with a suggestion of incredulity, "What do you mean?"

"I mean," he answered deliberately, "that I am going to prove the sincerity of my love for you by entrusting you with a secret on which my life may depend. You must believe in me, when I confide to you alone of all the world that Captain Martindale met his death at my hand."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE END OF THE INTERVIEW

THE declaration, although no news to Alexia, was, coming as it did, startlingly unexpected. It was, moreover, as she instinctively realized, a cunning move which forced her into an embarrassing position. But she gave no sign that she was already aware of the crucial fact. "Yours?" she exclaimed in a tone of horror which was not altogether affected. "You killed Captain Martindale?"

Gastineau nodded. His face bore a look almost of sympathetic amusement at her concern. "By what was practically an accident," he answered; "although it might be hard to prove that. It is due to myself now to tell you exactly how it happened. Do sit down," he continued, with an easy smile, as he pushed a chair towards her. "You need not be afraid of me; on the contrary, it is I who might fear you."

He moved away from her chair, and she sat down.

"Of course," he began, "you remember the night of the Vaux House ball, and, perhaps, what had passed between us just before. I will not inflict upon you a description of my state of mind at that time, except to say that I was mad for love of you. I have nothing if not strength of will, yet it all shrivelled to naught where you were concerned; strive as I would, I could not overcome the love which tortured me a million times more than, as I felt to my shame and grief, it troubled and offended you."

He spoke, urged by present rather than past passion; eagerly as he was watching for it, he could detect no sign that his burning words touched her.

"I went," he continued, "to Vaux House that night desperately determined to make one last effort for—no, not for your love, that I knew to be a miracle beyond that night's working—but for your toleration; for a kind look, a smile, a dance, the touch of your hand, the sound of your voice; just a crumb, even to the mocking of my hunger."

He paused. Alexia sat with averted face, motionless as a statue, yet with the suggestion of being keenly attentive. If he expected her to speak, her attitude never flattered him that she would break her silence.

"I little knew," he resumed, "to what fate I was going. That the racking torture I suffered could be heightened was inconceivable. Ah! I never imagined then the depths of despair, and worse, to which love can lead a man. Up to the moment I entered Vaux House I had suffered, Heaven knows how greatly, from your coldness, from your rejection of all my advances, from, as I flattered myself, your misjudgment of me, but, except negatively, I had been free from the hell's torture of jealousy. Now you can comprehend something of my mind on that fateful night?"

She made, almost indifferently, a slight inclination of the head; not looking towards him, or giving any further sign of sympathy.

He proceeded. "My story shall not be long now. I saw you, and watched you dancing, watched you enviously, longingly. Still there was just a spark left in the ashes of my hopes, which at our first meeting had blazed up so brightly. I was awaiting my opportunity, and presently it seemed to have come. I had seen you leave the ball-room; I slipped out by another door intending to make my way round and meet you; anticipating, hoping that, by biding my time, I might find you alone. Accordingly I worked my way round by the outer suite of rooms till I came to the point where I calculated we might meet. I was not wrong. I saw you in the room beyond with two men, one of whom was Captain Martindale. The other man went away; you and Martindale spoke together, and then, evidently at his suggestion, you and he strolled towards an inner room, a flirtation corner. You remember? "

Again she nodded gravely, speaking no word. "You did not notice me," Gastineau resumed. "Your talk with Martindale was too engrossing; confidential enough to make me burn with jealousy. At the door of the inner room you hesitated. It was natural, having regard to your partner's reputation. He laid his hand upon your arm, urging you to go in. You shook off his grasp—there was a thrill of satisfaction to me in that,—he went on a pace, persuading you to follow. I watched anxiously for the result, meaning to accost you should you turn back. But he prevailed, and you went slowly after him into the room. Ah! how I hated him! How I tried to think the worse of you for yielding. I quietly crossed the room to the doorway through which you had disappeared, my mad jealousy making me careless of what I did. At the door I stopped and listened. I could hear your voices in the room beyond, but not your words. Making a slight change in my position, my foot touched something hard on the carpet.

It was the little jewelled sword, the hair ornament. Instantly I recognized it as yours; you may be sure that every detail of your appearance was familiar to me. I took it up eagerly. At last, Countess, you have the solution of that element in the mystery."

"Yes." The monosyllable sounded cold, almost resentful.

"Chance," he continued, as coolly now as though he were opening a case in Court, "had given me an excuse for breaking in upon your flirtation, of spoiling Martindale's opportunity, but jealousy kept me back; hurry would spoil my chance of appearing at the critical moment. I tried to catch a glimpse of you, but could not; to have passed through the doorway would have meant to show myself. But I saw in my difficulty that there seemed to be another entrance to the room. If I could get round that way I might hear what Martindale was saying. The thought uppermost in my mind was to protect you from him, a man of notoriously bad principles where women were concerned; you may believe me, Countess, when I say that jealousy did not altogether account for my resolve to intervene. It was bad enough to fail to win you; to lose you to a man of Martindale's character was not to be endured. I went quickly back and through another room which I knew must lead from that in which you stayed. I opened the communicating door quietly; as luck would have it a portière hung beyond it; behind this I could stand, in the room, yet unseen. I am telling you everything, Countess, exactly as it happened; palliating nothing, excusing nothing, save on the ground of the devouring love that had possession of me."

If he looked for a softening of her attitude, none was visible; it was simply attentive without a sign of feeling. "I stood there," he resumed, as though now desirous to make an end quickly, "listening with jealous ears. Your voices were so low that I could hear little of your talk, which was all the worse for my state of mind. But presently a word reached my ears like a stab. It stung me out of my restraint. I pulled aside the curtain and looked into the room. I saw—the kiss."

"Without knowing what led up to it." Alexia spoke in a level voice, as though forced to suggest in her justification another than the obvious reason.

Gastineau continued. "You left him then quickly; and, to my surprise, he did not follow. I could just see the self-satisfied look on his face as he stood looking after you. It was that look that kept me there till he noticed me. I suppose he gathered from my expression what I had heard and seen; anyhow he began to abuse and insult me—after the manner of an empty-headed Guardsman who had been caught playing a disreputable game. I replied hotly enough; my rage and jealous hate were beyond restraint; as to being an eavesdropper, I had as much right there as he; he, a dishonourable Philander, had everything to be ashamed of; I nothing. I waited for a break in the somewhat sharp sarcasm with which he assailed me, and then began, in the most stinging language my profession had taught me, to paint his character, his reputation as I then saw it. I dare say he had never before had such taunts flung at him. I stung him into a state of speechless rage; the few retorts he had attempted were feeble and simply furnished me with fresh turns of recrimination. As his temper rose, mine fell; for I began to enjoy the castigation I was giving him. At last the cutting slashes of my tongue whipped him beyond endurance.

" 'You——!' he cried, choking with rage. 'I 'll teach you to insult me; I 'll show you the difference between a soldier and a wretched limb of the law; I 'll shake the miserable life out of you.'

"He came up and took me by the throat. I am not a physically weak man, and he found me stronger than he had imagined. I released myself from his grip without much difficulty. This enraged him still more; he was one of those stupid men who cannot bear to have their self-constituted superiority put in question. With insulting words, he attacked me again, but our first encounter had brought to my recollection that I still held in my hand your little sword. I had no wish for a further contest, so retreated a few steps as he advanced upon me."

" 'Keep off, you great bully!' I said. 'If you lay hands on me again it will be the worse for you. A pity you cannot behave yourself towards either women or men.'

"Following me up with a vicious look in his eyes, Martindale made a sudden rush forward and seized me again by the throat, this time with both hands. 'I 'll teach you to spy upon me, you skunk: I 'll spoil your game before you get the chance of spoiling mine again.' His big, strong hands encircled my throat, one from the front and the other from behind; the clutch became so vicious that I could not breathe; the man was, I knew, mad with rage; honestly I thought he would strangle me. Against the terrible grip I could do nothing; all power was leaving me with my breath; the agony became intense, it was that of death; my mind became suddenly clear as a dying man's, and, with the sudden flash of hyper-consciousness, I remembered again the little weapon I still clutched. On the instant I struck out at him with it, in a last despairing effort, with all the strength that was left me. So little did I count on the effectiveness of the stroke, that it was with surprise I felt the grip round my throat almost simultaneously relax. Martindale gave a kind of choking sigh, and fell forward upon me. Reeling with faintness, I had just strength enough to break his fall to the floor; he slid down through my arms and lay there, dead. That is all; the rest is known to the world. It is good of you to have listened so patiently to my long story. But I owe it to myself, if not to you, to convince you that I am not quite a murderer, and at the same time to give you the true account of how Martindale came by his death."

He waited for her response. "Yes," she said, breaking at last the tenseness of her attitude; "I am glad to know how it really happened." For the first time she let her eyes rest on his face, but, though his own seemed to search for it, there was no suggestion of tenderness or invitation in them.

He took a step towards her. "I hope," he said, "it may make all the difference in our relations to each other."

The grey eyes hardened now. "If you mean that we should be more than comparative strangers, that cannot be."

She spoke boldly, and he wondered whether her spirit could be as brave as her words.

"Indeed," he returned, with a smile of underlying resolve, "we must be more than that."

"Must?" She repeated the word with a little scornful laugh. Then with more dignity, "You surely forget yourself to say that to me."

"Shall I tell you," he spoke more humbly, "why I used the word?"

Her only answer was a shrug of impatience, indifference.

"It was," he continued, "because I feel certain, am absolutely convinced that you and I, united, would be a great power in this world of ours. That there are no two people living to-day whose alliance would lead to a more splendid position. When I speak of power, I mean intellectual, social, political; a power in everything that could work for the good we should choose; in a very few years our influence would be unbounded, our wealth and position more than sufficient for every aim. This is not the mere vapouring of a man's vanity. I know and feel my power, it would be absurd affectation to shut my eyes to what I have already accomplished. Take but one instance. When lately I was lying half-dead on a couch from which I never thought to rise, I made another man's career, young Herriard's; pushed him, without an effort, in a whim of mere gratitude for a slight service rendered me, pushed him into a brilliant position, as easily as I could move a piece on a chess-board. You know that?"

"Yes; I understand that," she answered, almost mechanically.

"So I am justified," Gastineau resumed, his pleading growing more urgent, "in saying that, now my health is restored, nothing can stop me; the force that drives me through the throng of my fellows is irresistible. If only you were by my side, the world would be at our feet; since, allied, we should represent the great forces that have ever moved, will ever move it. Countess—Alexia, forgive my boldness when I tell you that we, you and I, have no right, it would be an act of short-sighted folly, to throw ourselves away on inferior mates. You must know this, you who are so clever, who can read men and the world; I cannot imagine that you can be blind to the hideous mistake you would commit in allying yourself to a mere puppet, a weakling, the simulacrum of a man, such as Geoffrey Herriard."

"Mr. Gastineau," Alexia interrupted him with scarcely restrained indignation. "I can listen to this language no longer."

"But you must, Countess," he returned insistently. "I am bound to put the question, the chance of your future with its unparalleled prospects, before you plainly, even at the risk of offence. I have in this touched only on the wordly reasons for our alliance, intruding no word of love; of mine which fills my whole being, making me your slave, your adoring worshipper; of yours which I feel in my heart will come to be mine one day. Countess, can you reject me now? Have I not been frank, and laid bare my heart and very soul and the terrible secret of my life before you? Alexia, put away all these vain fancies and prejudices; accept the power, the empire which I cast at your feet, and tell me you will be my wife." As the note of passion deepened he tried, making a swift approach, to clasp her in his arms, but she drew herself up proudly and repulsed him.

"Alexia," he urged, desperately intent, "I will give you power beyond every other woman in the kingdom, I will raise you to a height more dazzling than you dream of. It shall be my one object in life, I swear it. Don't, don't reject me. Think what you refuse. Oh," he cried, almost savagely, as her attitude grew even more repelling, "tell me what it is that makes you hate me so. Have I not confessed the truth to you, and purged the taint of blood-guiltiness from my soul? Alexia," he demanded, with passionate fierceness, "tell me! You shall tell me."

But she gave no sign of faltering before the tempest of his insistence.

"Mr. Gastineau," she said, as coldly as the situation permitted, and with more than a touch of decision, "this interview has lasted long enough, too long. Let it come to an end now. No good purpose can be served by my listening to you any longer. Understand once, and for all time, that under no circumstances can I accept your proposal, which is made dishonourable by the very fact of my engagement to Mr. Herriard. That is all I have to say to you. Please go."

Gastineau's face had been dark with a strong man's repressed anger; now it lightened strangely as with the anticipation of a premeditated stroke. "Then you reject my offer, Countess, absolutely? " he demanded quietly.

"Absolutely." The grey eyes met his steadily, without a sign of compromise. And in his there was no acceptance of defeat, but rather a challenge.

"I have asked you to do nothing dishonourable, Countess," he said calmly, "knowing, as I do, that your engagement with Herriard will come to nothing."

More than a challenge now; it was a threat.

"I cannot discuss that with you," Alexia returned.

"If," he said, with a cold deliberateness that was significant of a purpose, "you have any regard for Geoffrey Herriard, you will best show it by accepting me."

"You have had my answer," she said, moving towards the bell.

"Given in ignorance," he retorted, "in wilful blindness as to what the future may hold for you." He moved nearer to her, his face resolute and threatening. "If Herriard is not already dead, he will never live to be your husband."

She gave an instant's upward glance at the face, whose expression of sinister power beat back the contempt she tried to show in hers. Without a word she put her hand to the bell. Before, however, she could ring, the door opened, and the butler came in with a telegram. Alexia took it, and turned as though to dismiss Gastineau.

"You had better open it, Countess," he said quietly, "before I go. It probably confirms my news of Herriard."

Alexia was in two minds; but in her desire above all things not to show fear, she tore open the telegram.

"Yes," she said, with a supreme effort to hide her sickening terror, "it confirms what you have told me. Good-night."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE FACE IN THE BOX

BY the earliest train next morning Alexia and her brother travelled down to Bradbury, and found to their relief that Herriard's condition was not nearly so serious as they had feared. He was suffering from a wound in the head and slight concussion caused by the vicious blow that had been dealt him; but the doctor made light of his hurt, and declared two or three days would see him practically recovered.

This was grateful news to Alexia, who had dreaded the worst; nevertheless the ugly, haunting fact remained of a malignant purpose secretly at work against her lover and herself. None of the local politicians could account for what was admittedly an organized attack. It had taken the whole town by surprise, not merely by its unusual ferocity, but by the comparative absence of adequate motive, and by the secrecy with which it had been planned. But to Alexia it was no mystery. She recognized well enough the determined, energetic brain that had conceived and designed the murderous affray, and she was well aware how thankful (if fear could leave room for gladness) she might be that the attack had failed to achieve its ulterior and especial object. Gastineau's words to her had made that plain enough.

Nevertheless, so anxious was she not to retard or jeopardize her lover's recovery that until it was almost complete she said nothing to him of Gastineau's visit. Then she told him everything, and the diabolical plot became clear to them both. It was certain now that the man Herriard had seen was Hencher; to him, doubtless, had been left the final conduct of the attack; it must, too, have been he who had sent off the late telegram to Alexia. But the whole object and motive of the affair were so clearly the outcome of Gastineau's design against Herriard, that it seemed scarcely worth while to piece together the details of the scheme.

"Naturally, it is of the utmost importance for his safety to put me out of the way," Herriard said bitterly; "quite apart from his desire to marry you. You and I are the only two people in the world he has really to fear; we know too much; in fact, everything. If once I were dead, and you his wife, that fear would be laid to rest, and he would be free to practise whatever new scheme of life he may have decided upon."

"Then," suggested Alexia, restlessly eager, "let us forestall him, and tell everything to the police. It is our only chance. Are we to be at the mercy of this devil incarnate?"

"Who has none," was the gloomy reply. "No," Herriard continued, with a shake of the head; "there is no hope in that. I can only repeat that there is nothing tangible against Gastineau; only a suspicion, on which the authorities would hardly dare to arrest him. His supposititious death is no offence at law."

"But, my dear Geoffrey, are you, then, to go forever in fear of your life? Do these threats and attempts constitute no offence?"

Herriard laughed hopelessly. "Who could prove them? Do you think that calculating mind has not foreseen and provided against every possible contingency? It would give a man of Gastineau's resource little trouble to loose himself from any knots with which we might try to bind him. My story of his threats he would probably laugh out of court."

"But his attack upon you in your chambers?"

"It would be uncorroborated. He would probably swear that I attacked him; and our former relations would give colour to the story he would concoct, while they would tend to the discredit of my evidence. No, dear one, I see no help or hope from an appeal to the law. Just think how improbable, how incredible my story would sound told in the dry atmosphere of a Law Court, and impugned by the cleverest brain in the profession."

"Yes; I fear you are right," Alexia said dejectedly.

"Even if I gained my point," Herriard went on, "it would not mean effective protection against him. London is the best policed city in the world, but that does not prevent a man's life being absolutely at the mercy of any other man's determination to take it. And Gastineau's purpose is, we know, above everything tenacious and relentless."

"Geoffrey, my darling," Alexia cried in her agitation, "what are we to do? Is there no hope? I would rather kill this fiend with my own hand than that he should take you from me."

"He has not taken me yet, and I mean to make a fight for it," Herriard assured her, assuming a confidence he did not feel. He knew his enemy's untiring vindictiveness and resource too well.

For a long while they talked over chances and expedients for escaping from the net, spun by that busy brain, that seemed to have enmeshed them. The present moment was theirs, with its mockery of freedom, and it seemed monstrous to accept the future with blank despair. In the end, after many a futile struggle against the narrowing circle of bands that was drawn round them, after many a suggestion rejected in its very conception, a course was decided upon. It was that they should be married at once, with the closest secrecy that might hope to elude even Gastineau's vigilance, and that they should leave England, as already planned, for a long sojourn on Count von Rohnburg's Austrian estate. Certainly it seemed but a poor method of securing safety;—was there a corner on the globe where a man might hope to hide from that inexorable, unswerving pursuit?—still there was the chance, the only one, of snatching a fearful, short-lived joy in defiance of the incarnate malignity which forbade it.

Once decided upon, the details of the plan were soon settled. A special license would be procured, and the marriage would take place at a village church in Gloucestershire, the vicar of which was an old friend and schoolfellow of Herriard's. Then, with all the wariness and secrecy they could devise, they would set off upon the long journey to Rohnburg, trusting to chance for safety, and to the improbable event that Gastineau might see fit to abandon his scheme of persecution and pursuit. At least, they argued, the danger would not be increased by the change of locality. He might, indeed, be better able to deal with his enemy, should he follow him, in that remote spot than in one of the centres of civilization, where the rules of law and order permit no drastic measures for obviating an unprovable danger. Anyhow at Rohnburg they would be man to man.

A very few days saw Herriard quite recovered from the hurt which had by good fortune just fallen short of its sinister intent, and the plans for the hurried marriage were carried through without a hitch. Both Alexia and he felt that the peaceful village church in its picturesque seclusion made the ceremony, which derived an added solemnity from the threatening cloud of the unknown which in the glorious sunshine grew darker by contrast, fitting indeed to a union set in all the element of romance. But that day of happiness and many that followed were unmarred by any sign of the dreaded fate that should be dogging them. Whether Gastineau were near or far from them, they were troubled by no suggestion of his presence or intentions; their world, full of snatched delight, seemed free from that hateful influence.

From the lovely rural nook Herriard and his bride made their way across country to Harwich, thence to the Continent; and reached Vienna, the penultimate stage of their journey, without any disquieting incident.

With a confidence born of the continued immunity from all indication of danger, they determined to stay two days in the fascinating Austrian capital. On the morning after their arrival Herriard happened to meet Dr. Hallamar in the Kärnthnerstrasse. An impulse made him accost the great specialist, and speak of the subject which dominated his mind. After a few words of greeting, he said, "That was a wonderful cure of yours, Doctor, in the case of Mr. Murray."

Just a film of caution seemed to form over the professional enthusiasm which illuminated the doctor's face.

"Ah, yes; in many ways the most remarkable of my experience. Unfortunately——" he broke off, eyeing

Herriard doubtfully. "A singular man, your friend Mr. Murray," he added, tentatively, it seemed.

"Very," Herriard agreed. "You refer to his wishing to keep his cure a secret?"

Hallamar nodded, throwing out his hands expressively. "Ach! There it is," he exclaimed vehemently. "The most extraordinary case of all I have treated. The most—I say it without vanity; science is, as I follow it, too serious, too stern in its reality to admit of that—the most surprising cure, utterly unhoped-for; I can tell you, Mr. Herriard, I undertook the case with great reluctance. My time is precious; moreover I am not fond of courting failure, and charging a necessarily high fee for a foregone disappointment. But there was something observable in your friend's character and temperament which induced me to undertake the experiment, for it was nothing more."

"He is a man of great determination."

The Professor made a significant gesture. "Quite abnormal. And it was in a great measure to that we owe a cure which comes as near to a miracle as science has yet attained. Ah! such strength of will, such fixity of purpose, what would the world be if they were general? A paradise in which all evils and difficulties would be overcome—or a hell of restless intellect. Well," he gave a shrug and a smile, "we are better as we are. Nevertheless your friend is a very remarkable man: it is a personality with which I am pleased, as an experience, to have been brought in contact."

"I can understand that," Herriard said, with a shade of gloom. "Then Murray was practically a sound man again when I first mentioned him to you?"

"Certainly he was," Hallamar answered emphatically.

"For what seemed, even to me, a really hopeless case, it was an astonishingly quick recovery of power. He was weeks ahead of my hitherto best patient. But then I have never had a patient of his character. Yes; he was cured when you first expressed a wish that I should treat him. And I may say I was much surprised that you, his intimate friend, should have been kept in the dark."

"He wished, no doubt, to give me an agreeable surprise," Herriard explained grimly. "As it was, I found out his recovery by a mere accident."

"Ach, so! " Dr. Hallamar's strong face wore a look of sagacious curiosity. "It is strange. Yes; I remember he sent me a note desiring me to say nothing about his recovery to you. Ah, a man of singular strength of mind; he was evidently preparing a surprise for his friend. You are his great friend; not? "

The question was put so abruptly, so pointedly, that Herriard was startled into looking up quickly into the other's face. He felt that Hallamar was trying to read in his eyes the true state of his relationship with Gastineau; and that the result was a confirmed doubt.

"We are scarcely," he answered, "as friendly as we were once."

"No? " Hallamar's manner could not be said to express even a polite regret. "Well, perhaps that may be not altogether a bad thing," he suggested. "Mr. Murray is too clever for close friendship with most of us. Such towering intellect as his stands better alone."

With which significant, if equivocal, comment he gave his hand to Herriard and hurried off.

It was on the evening before their departure from Vienna that a strange experience befell them which, for a time at least, brought back their fears. Herriard had taken a box at the old Burg Theatre to see a famous melodramatic piece that had won popularity all over the Continent. At one part of the performance the lights in the auditorium were lowered to enhance the effect of a thrilling scene. Suddenly, as they sat in the darkness, Alexia clutched Herriard's arm. "Geoffrey!" she exclaimed under her breath.

Under the impression that the blood-curdling business on the stage had affected her, he gave her hand a reassuring clasp, and whispered a few light words making fun of the mimic horrors. But after that first start Alexia had quickly recovered her self-possession. She raised her fan till it half covered her face, while her eyes were directed apprehensively across the house.

"Geoffrey," she whispered, coolly now, though with an intensity of repressed fear, "don't look yet. In that box opposite, next the stage, a man is watching us. Be careful."

So the fear had returned. Herriard leaned back in his chair with an affected yawn and looked at the box Alexia had indicated. It was the only one on that side of the house which seemed untenanted.

"I can see no one in it," he said in a low tone. "The box seems empty."

"I am certain," she whispered back behind her fan, "that there was a man in it just now. I saw a pair of hateful eyes watching us out of the darkness. They have disappeared now; but I am sure of it."

"Gastineau?" Herriard dreaded to ask the question, yet knew there was no safety in ignoring the worst, if such it were.

"I cannot be certain," Alexia answered, and the tremor of her tone seemed to belie the doubt she expressed. "Is there another man on earth with eyes like his? "

Herriard tried to laugh reassuringly. "Surely that is not inconceivable," he returned, "especially in this cosmopolitan city. You say the man was watching us?"

"Yes."

Herriard strained his look to detect a sign of movement in the obscurity of the apparently empty box. But nothing broke the dead blackness of the recess. "I will go and make certain," he said, rising.

"No, no, Geoffrey," she objected apprehensively, "stay here; you must not go. There may be danger." And as she looked up at him, he could see, even through the darkness, the fear in her eyes.

"It is all right, darling," he replied, with perhaps more confidence than he felt. "I have my revolver; there can be no danger. Uncertainty is the worst now we have to fear, and I must put an end to that." So, with a reassuring caress, he left her.

Traversing the now dimly lighted semi-circular corridor Herriard made his way round the house till he came to the box he sought. Somewhat to his surprise, the door stood ajar. He opened it, and looked in. The box was empty.

Having convinced himself of this, Herriard asked the name of the gentleman who had occupied the box. He was told that through a misunderstanding that particular box had not been let, although the house was otherwise full. When he insisted that it had been lately occupied, he was told that he must be mistaken, or perhaps one of the attendants had gone into it for a few minutes to watch the great scene. Anyhow the officials were certain that the box had not been let or regularly occupied that evening.

Considerably relieved, Herriard went back to Alexia. As he reached her the curtain fell, and the lights were turned up again. "It was your fancy, dear one," he said, in answer to her apprehensive look. "No one was in that box. I searched it thoroughly and am certain it was empty; besides, they tell me it was not let to-night."

He was troubled to see that she was not reassured. "There was some one in it," she asserted in a tone of conviction. "Directly you had left me the door of that box opened, and a man passed out. I am sure of that. I distinctly saw the light from the passage beyond, and the man's figure against it."

"It is quite likely," he replied. "The official whom I spoke to suggested that one of the attendants went into the empty box to watch the scene. That is the real explanation; but we, having Gastineau on the nerves, are liable to see him anywhere."

It was plain to him that Alexia could not bring herself to accept the explanation, plausible as it was. The enjoyment of the evening was gone; they soon after left the theatre and returned to their hotel.

Neither on that night, however, nor on the next day, which was passed in completing their long journey, did they, although keenly alert, see anything to confirm their uneasiness. Gastineau, if it had indeed been he, was a man easily recognized, but their watchfulness saw no one resembling him. As the hours wore on, shortening the distance between her and the home she loved, Alexia's spirits rose, and she almost succeeded in persuading herself that the terror of the night before had been but a creature of her nervous fancy. And so it was in a happier state of mind that they caught their first glimpse of the great Schloss Rohnburg, standing in romantic picturesqueness amid its setting of pine woods; and at the sight of the noble old house, welcoming them in all its peaceful strength and beauty, they forgot their fears in the sense of security it suggested. Here was an asylum indeed; a delightful refuge from the intrigues and dangers of the outside world. They drove into the courtyard with a grateful sense of relief, and a feeling that they had outstripped their Nemesis and left danger far behind them.

The days that followed confirmed this idea, that the security for which they had scarcely dared to hope had been attained. The estate of Rohnburg seemed a compact miniature kingdom, in which Herriard and his bride were for the time all-powerful, and from which their authority would serve to keep any threatening intruder away. Somehow Herriard felt, as he explored the place, that the unwelcome appearance even of Gastineau in that spot would lose much of the terror which would be inspired by the idea of his tracking them with a sleuth-hound's tenacity amid the labyrinth of a populous city. To meet an enemy in the open should have no terrors for a man of courage, since the elements of surprise and mystery, which beget fear, are absent. So Herriard found, as the days passed, that the haunting sense of an impending blow coming from a quarter of which he was uncertain began to diminish. In an atmosphere of security, freedom, happiness, his spirits rose, carrying Alexia's with them. They walked together in the park which girded the Schloss, strolling along woodland paths, and every succeeding day they went farther afield. At first their walks were attended by a furtive watchfulness against the appearance of a dreaded form, for a hint of a sinister presence. Nothing, however, occurred to fulfil their expectation, and, by degrees, the strain of alertness was relaxed. And, while it lasted, they neither of them cared to let the other know how seriously their minds were haunted by the ever-present misgiving. For a brave mind hates the fear that is forced upon it too greatly to care to speak of it where the telling can avail nothing. And, assuredly, the more reason we have for keeping a bold face, the better too it is for the beating down of a dread which is nothing more than an invitation to our danger.

However, the long days as they went by brought with them nothing but the delight of lovers' existence, without sign of a disturbing element. Their heaven was without a cloud and they began to reproach themselves with having failed to enjoy its glory through vain fears of a tempest. So, as the time slipped by, the startling events they had passed through seemed nothing more than the recollection of a troubled dream, now fading in the light and joyousness of day. The venerable stronghold which was, for many a month now, to be their home, imparted to their hearts its sense of calm security. It was fairy-land they had reached at last; the gloom of the demon's night had been left far behind.

Yet on the bright sky of confident happiness a little fleck was soon to appear, the precursor of cloud and danger.

CHAPTER XXIX

A PORTENT

ONE evening the monotony of the Herriard's delightful existence under the shadow of the grey old Schloss was broken by the appearance of a company of poor strolling players. They were, it appeared, a band of humble comedians and pantomimists who, in the more rural and remote districts, went from village to village, to gain a precarious livelihood by giving a crude medley of melodrama and farce, interspersed with singing and acrobatic feats. To gain permission for a short performance at a great house naturally was, when such an opportunity presented itself, much to be desired. It meant probably less work for a greater reward, compared with the two or three hours' toil, required to conjure kreutzers from the thrifty peasants' pockets. Alexia knew this, and persuaded her husband to join with her in sanctioning the humble show. Herriard had at first shown himself a little dubious as to the wisdom of inviting strangers within the precincts of the castle. But Alexia quickly laughed away his doubts; these strolling mummers were familiar visitors. They had made their appearance there at more or less regular intervals ever since she could remember; she would like to hear their bombastic nonsense and the old songs once again for the sake of old times, and she called Gollmar, the ancient steward, to bear witness that there was no harm in the poor fellows.

So it came that Herriard readily fell in with Alexia's wish; he ordered the troupe to be admitted to the inner courtyard, and for an hour they laughed together at the strange, half-incomprehensible performance of the strollers.

Certainly they were, for the most part, a strange, weird, almost forbidding dozen of human beings; but then in stage-struck peasants from the wild regions of Austro-Hungary one would scarcely expect to find the graces of players drawn from more civilized surroundings. When the performance was over, Herriard sent them a liberal fee, and they were given a substantial meal under the superintendence of Gollmar, who was directed to keep his eye upon them until they were once more outside the gates.

"It was, perhaps, as well, *gnädige Herr*," the old man observed afterwards, "to keep the fellows under observation. Our countrymen have a saying, 'One coat suffices to keep warm a player and a thief.' Not but what these scoundrels are good honest mountebanks for their sort; still, there was no harm in keeping them from the temptation to pilfer. Old Karonsek, the leader, I have known for well-nigh forty years: he has, naturally, a reputation to preserve, since he boasts he has never seen the inside of a prison; but the younger men—" he gave a shrug, "what would you have? A man does not often turn player till every respectable calling is closed to him, and our proverb says a man who has no home has no neighbours to call him thief when he steals. But," he added, by way of softening his strictures upon the average morality of theatrical strollers, "your honour's kindness has given untold pleasure to the household. Few amusements come our way in this remote spot, and in the late Count's time we always made the humblest strollers welcome."

Two nights later Herriard was roused from his sleep by the furious barking of a dog, followed by a man's angry cry. Snatching up his revolver, he ran downstairs, and, guided by the sounds, rushed into the library. The moonlight, streaming in through the half-open window, showed him one of the men servants, Jan Martin, leaning over a writing table, his hand held to his chest, while he was almost inarticulate with rage and fear. As Herriard's approach he pointed excitedly to the window. "There! He has gone that way. A robber, Excellency: the wretch has stabbed me. Quick! he cannot be far away. Fritz has gone after him."

With a word to the wounded man, Herriard passed out by the window. He could hear Fritz, the wolf-hound, still barking savagely, but now there came from him a howl of pain, and then all was silent. He hurried forward, and about a hundred yards away came upon the poor animal bleeding, and quite disabled. No sign of the midnight robber was to be seen, although Herriard ran in pursuit of him. But the plantation at which he had arrived was large, its paths devious; unless he came upon him by chance it was almost hopeless to expect to overtake the man. Herriard stopped and listened. Not a sound was to be heard except presently that of running footsteps of men from the castle who, headed by Gollmar, were coming in pursuit. But half-an-hour's energetic search by the party brought no result; the miscreant, whoever he was, had made good his escape.

As Herriard took his way back to the castle his apprehensions, which had been lulled, returned in full strength. In the courtyard the poor dog, Fritz, lay moaning in pain. Herriard examined his hurt, which he found to be a punctured wound just below the throat. On the ground beside him lay an object which Herriard eagerly picked up and scrutinized. It was a small piece of coarse cloth, evidently torn by the dog from the intruder's coat. He showed it to Gollmar.

"Ah," said the old steward, looking critically at the fragment, "it is as I suspected. Certainly one of the play-actor fellows who were here on Tuesday. I noticed one or two knavish faces among the new members of the troupe. He has been tempted to earn a year's pay in a single night. A daring, beggarly villian. His after-thought is likely to mean death to Jan Martin, if not to poor Fritz as well. Well, if Fritz dies there will be a reckoning to pay with the Count."

"You think, then, it was one of those wretched fellows, the players?"

"I am sure of it, *gnädige Herr*. Look at this scrap of cloth. It is of the coarsest description. Such as would be worn only by a peasant or a strolling mountebank. And no peasant, in his mind or out of it, would dare to plan a midnight robbery, with murder if need be, at the Schloss Rohnburg. It is out of the question. No; this evidence points to one of those ranting tatterdemalions, who have the wits of a drunkard and the reverence of a pig."

Gollmar's manifest conviction of the man's identity somewhat reassured Herriard, and he was able to relate the affair to Alexia without communicating to her the fears he had at first entertained. The doctor who had been sent for reported Jan Martin's wound as not dangerous; with a week's quiet he would recover from its effects. Fritz, too, had had a wonderful escape; the evidently hasty stab he had received having just missed being mortal.

Still, although, providentially, not much harm had been done, the affair gave Herriard considerable uneasiness. He made light of it, since there seemed no object to be gained by taking it, outwardly at least, more seriously. Yet, somehow, it contrived to give him an ever-present conviction of impending danger. When he reasoned the matter out with himself he was bound to admit that the common-sense arguments pointed to the confirmation of Gollmar's simple theory. What more likely, he asked himself, than that a member of a lawless, homeless, strolling party of mountebanks, recruited probably from the dregs of society, if not, indeed, from the jails, should use the opportunity of admittance to a house of wealth to plan an attempt which promised a tempting haul? Had Herriard's mind, as he admitted, not been full of Gastineau and his methods, he would not have thought to question the obvious explanation. As it was, the affair, unpleasant enough in itself, gave a disagreeable shock, the effects of which did not leave him when he found that the harm done by the midnight marauder was far less than it might have been.

But the days went by, resuming their uneventful course. A week passed, and at its end both man and dog had quite recovered from their wounds. Herriard began to think that it had, after all, been a case of attempted robbery by one of the strolling prayers. Enquiries in the district had quite failed to identify the scrap of cloth, and the idea that the culprit belonged to the neighbourhood was scouted by every one in the place. A watch was now kept every night in the castle, but no sign was detected of a renewal of the attempt. Naturally, they said, the players were now far away. On the night in question they had been performing at a village but a few miles from Rohnburg.

So Herriard's uneasiness, having nothing new to feed upon, gradually subsided, and he gave himself up once more to all the charm of existence which that romantic domain afforded him.

One day it was announced to him that Fritz, the wolf-hound, had mysteriously disappeared. He had been always a domesticated animal, content for the most part to lie basking in the sun on the terrace or in the courtyard, and had never been known to stray far from the castle. But now he had not been seen for twenty-four hours, and every one was at a loss to account for his absence. His wound was quite healed, and he had seemed in perfect health, although one of the men had noticed that he was unusually restless. Herriard was at first inclined to be somewhat perturbed by the occurrence, till one of the foresters, having a peculiar knowledge of animals, adduced a theory which tended to set his mind at rest. The dog's behaviour, he declared, was perfectly explicable. In his natural state he would be a fierce, marauding, dangerous animal. His real character had been tamed and held in suspension by the luxury and kindness of a domestic life. Now the hurt he had received had roused the animal's fiercer nature which had but slumbered. That this was the case had been indicated by the dog's noticeable restlessness; he had now assuredly gone off on a wild hunting prowl; the taste of live blood (he had doubtless bitten the robber) had quickened his instinct, and induced a craving for living prey.

With this explanation Herriard had to be satisfied. He ordered, however, a thorough search to be made for the dog, and it was with a certain sense of relief that he heard this was unsuccessful; he had feared the finding of the animal dead by that mysterious hand which his fancy would picture as stretched forth against him and his.

But Alexia laughed him out of his fear of the unknown. Was not the world smiling on them with all the delights of an ideal existence? What sign was there, save in imagination, of the danger they had dreaded? It was a sin to let the memory of a trouble, now past and gone, destroy the delight of the present hour. Paul Gastineau was not a fool to waste, in pursuing them with his hatred, time which might be spent to more advantage in opening out his new career. Probably he had for once spoken the frank truth, and was by that time across the ocean, eager to put into practice the fresh schemes and projects of his busy, ambitious brain. In the weeks they had spent at the Schloss Rohnburg what tangible sign had there been of the presence or machinations of their arch enemy? None. If he had meant to strike, why this delay? He was, above all things, a man of swift action. No. Geoffrey should not worry himself any more with those fancies. The danger was now a myth, opposed by common sense; if it were real, the worry would not keep it away. So Herriard resolved to be guided by Alexia's counsel, and to give himself up thenceforward to the full enjoyment of the new life he had entered upon. After the stuffy turmoil of the Courts it was indeed a change full of delight, a life never even dreamt of a month before.

There was plenty of sport to be had in the forest which stretched away from the Schloss, and Herriard, with the enjoyment of one for whom struggle and danger had suddenly ceased, threw himself with zest into the novel, emancipated life, and wandered every day farther in pursuit of game. In the still depths of the forest, in a fairyland which seemed far from the ken of worldly strife and schemes, Herriard felt he had left the events of a few weeks back years behind him; he could laugh at his fears. Paul Gastineau was no longer a haunting terror, but merely a strange episode.

What creatures of our impressions, our surroundings we are. How one mind, determined, inscrutable, can dominate a weaker: how long the paralyzing effect of a stronger will lingers, to be weakened and at last banished not by a human effort but by the external agency of a changed environment.

Reflections such as these were passing through Herriard's mind as, after a full day's sport, he sat, tranquilly smoking a cigar, on the platform of an ancient hunting-tower which stood in the forest depths some two or three miles from the castle. The two foresters who had accompanied him he had sent home with the heavy bag of game; being himself somewhat tired with his long tramp, he had thought to rest awhile before resuming his homeward walk.

The tower was situated in an open clearing where three glades met. To Herriard, as he stretched himself comfortably on the old weather-beaten benches, it seemed the most tranquilly romantic spot in the world. All round him from the sunlit dell rose majestically the dark violet masses of the vast forest; its density pierced by the three moss-carpeted roads which the tower commanded. The day had been hot; a hazy film seemed to hang over the dark, illimitable battalions of pines, standing motionless in the windless atmosphere. On either side of the long vista which lay before Herriard's idle observation, the haze seemed to line the dark walls, fringing the avenue beyond the line of trees, and leaving a narrow road still bright and clear.

Presently Herriard became conscious that far down this glade, perhaps half an English mile away, a figure had appeared. For a while he watched it lazily, as a break in that magnificent monotony it had become the most interesting object in sight, and it amused the watcher to observe whether the figure was moving towards the tower or away from it. Nearer, surely; but with a progress so slow as to be scarcely perceptible. Herriard took out his stalking glasses and brought them to bear on the object of his curiosity. A man, a bent old man, he seemed, carrying a load, probably a faggot-gatherer crawling on his daily round. Herriard put back the glasses—he was never quite free now from suspicion—and contentedly resumed his cigar. Then he fell to moralizing, as an idle man will, over the lot of such an one as the solitary peasant who was creeping slowly towards him. Presently as he looked, the figure bore to one side of the track, and next moment vanished in the curtain of mist that hung before the line of trees. He had crept off by some forest path, Herriard conjectured, with a slight feeling of an ended companionship. For in that place, surrounded by the almost oppressive loneliness compelled by nature in all her unchallenged predominance and autocracy, even the distant presence of an obscure peasant creeping laboriously through the forest ways to his primitive hovel, gave a welcome touch of company. But he was gone now, passed out of his observer's life, in all probability never to cross his way again.

With that thought in his mind Herriard gave an exclamation of surprise. There again was the man he had seen and who was still furnishing a text for his moralizing; he had reappeared as abruptly as he had vanished. He was close at hand now, almost under the tower; the same bent figure, bowed beneath a bundle of faggots, and using one as a staff to aid his steps.

The old man seemed to have come quickly from the point where he had disappeared not many minutes before; if, perhaps, more time had not passed in the interval than Herriard was conscious of. The man came on until he was under the tower, and so out of sight from the platform. Herriard was debating with himself whether he should accost the solitary creature and brighten the day for him with a present of a few florins, when, somewhat to his surprise, he heard the slow footsteps ascending the winding stairs of the tower. Perhaps, he thought, the old fellow is accustomed to billet himself here; the half-ruinous building is useless enough; one could scarcely complain.

At the floor below the footsteps stopped for a while: if the poor man was resting there comfortably Herriard would not disturb him unnecessarily. No; he was moving about softly; now, surely he was on the stairs again, coming up to the roof platform. It seemed a strange thing to do; the reason was not quite obvious, unless the man had noticed a stranger there, and was coming up to beg. Herriard watched for his appearance with some curiosity. The ascent sounded hard and laboured, and when at length the expected figure emerged from the trap-door the man's back was, by the trend of the steps, turned towards the place where Herriard sat. For a few moments he seemed to fumble with his neckcloth, apparently unaware that he was not alone, since he took no notice of him.

"What in the world is he doing?" As the remark was uttered half aloud, the man turned quickly. The unkempt beard was gone; and, with a great leap of the heart, Herriard found himself staring at the face of Paul Gastineau.

CHAPTER XXX

THE LAST MEETING

IF Herriard had had for the moment any doubts as to Gastineau's identity, the sneering smile, quiet and purposeful, would have set them at rest.

"At last, Mr. Geoffrey Herriard, we meet again; and finally," the cold, incisive voice said; and Herriard knew that the crisis of his fate, possibly his last minute of life, had come. For as he spoke Gastineau drew his hand from the pocket of his ragged peasant's coat, and the polished barrel of a revolver glinted in the sweep of sunlight that poured up the glade and struck the tower. The action was characteristic of the man, business-like, yet no more than just necessarily demonstrative. But it contained a significant suggestion that resistance was futile; it said plainly, no quarter.

"I am sorry," Gastineau proceeded, as coolly as though he had come to discuss a professional matter, "to be obliged to interrupt your repose; but you will understand that when a man is more or less fighting for his life he cannot afford to be punctilious. I think, Herriard, you have a revolver in your pocket. Covered as you are by mine, its use is not apparent. Do me the favour to take it out and throw it over the parapet. It will obviate any preoccupation in our talk."

He came to within a few feet of Herriard with his own revolver covering the other's heart. Herriard, realizing his helplessness, took out his weapon and threw it over the embrasured wall. It fell noiselessly on the soft turf below.

"What do you want with me, Gastineau?" he said, in the dull voice of a man who sees no escape from his fate.

Gastineau drew back a few steps, and seated himself on the low parapet that protected the stairway. "A little conversation first of all," he answered; banteringly it would have been but for the suggestion of a dark purpose behind the easy manner; "a few minutes' talk, and then"—he made a deprecating gesture—"silence."

The word was ominous and struck chill to Herriard's heart. He had busied his mind in looking for a way of escape, but none presented itself. In the sickening sense of despair he could thank Heaven for the short-lived joy and love that had been his.

There was nothing he could say to any purpose: he felt that, and waited for Gastineau to continue.

"I dare say you were weak enough to imagine you had given me the slip," the chilling, hateful voice resumed. "Certainly it is a far cry from Mayfair to the Schloss Rohnburg, but then the necessity of self-preservation cannot stop to take heed of time and space. It may astonish you that I have seen proper to take so much trouble."

Looking at the evil, resolute face, Herriard could only wonder how he could have been fool enough to imagine that his enemy had abandoned the set purpose of his vindictiveness and self-interest to which every fibre of his proved character surely held him. The affair of the nocturnal intruder was no mystery now, if ever doubt on the matter should have been allowed to dwell with his knowledge of this man.

"You talk of self-preservation," he said, with a dulled effort at reasoning, for the word seemed to mock him; "as though you were convinced I had some design against you. I have none; you might know it."

Gastineau's laugh showed him that the protest carried no weight with him. "My good fellow," he returned patronizingly, "you scarcely comprehend my position. It is, perhaps, a trifle beyond your grasp. Putting aside for the moment the fact that you have done me the ill-turn which no man forgives, and which was in your case, I suppose, as glaring an instance of ingratitude as any on record, let me put the situation before you from my point of view."

"Yes; let me hear it."

Herriard felt his only chance lay in prolonging the preliminaries of the act that was surely meditated.

Gastineau was lighting a cigarette. "The immense successes the world has wondered at have been gained through foresight," he said, almost meditatively; "the great failures have been courted by want of it. The man who cannot see beyond his nose, who takes things as they are, and not as they will be, can never have a great career in front of him. Consequently, my good Herriard," he blew out a long streak of smoke, "I am obliged, unpleasant as it may be, to deal with you not as you are to-day, a comparatively harmless turtle-dove, but as my prescience tells me you will be in the future, an active, threatening danger."

There was death, Herriard saw, in the eyes that had marked, in the mind that had tracked him down; no suggestion of relenting, no room for pity, only the steely look of doom.

"No; never now a danger to you, Gastineau," he said with dry lips.

The other smiled. "I can read your future better than you," he returned equivocally. "And your character. My four years' study of that has scarcely gone for nothing. You are, perhaps, not exactly, an absorbing danger at the present moment, in the present year, if you like. I would not care to say as much with respect to a few years hence."

The man was clearly, grimly settled in his purpose; it was with him manifestly an affair of calculation rather than of passion. Despite the deep purple glory of the flaming sunset, the night seemed already enveloping Herriard, as he stood there facing his doom. To him the warm, scented air was chill and heavy; the gorgeous flood of sunlight that bathed the tower was lurid and murky as a torch of the Inquisition. But he kept down the betrayal of the sickening despair at his heart, answering his master quietly.

"If you really read my character, Gastineau, you must know that it is far from being restless and aggressive like your own. With me it is live and let live."

"Ah!" Gastineau's lips were contorted sarcastically. "A very apt motto at the present juncture. Nevertheless, one requires something more convincing than a trite copy-book text to persuade one of the desirability of living the rest of one's life under a sword of Damocles. You know the fable of the wise fool who neglected to keep his pet lion cub's claws pared. History, my good fellow, is full of such crass omissions and their consequences. So far as I am concerned, history shall not repeat itself."

There was hateful, sneering determination in the man's face as he spoke. Herriard knew well that he never relented, and wondered why his enemy did not make an end of the business without more parley. Gastineau's hand, grasping the revolver, was kept well in front of him, the wrist forming a pivot on his crossed knee. A struggle was clearly out of the question; the alert eyes never left him, for all their owner's mannered nonchalance. A sudden spring would mean a bullet through the heart before it came to a grapple.

"I can only repeat, Gastineau, that you can have nothing to fear from me." Herriard spoke mechanically; the suspense was numbing his mind; suspense that was a mere question of time, not deliverance.

Gastineau smiled. "If I am far from believing it, it does not follow that I doubt your sincerity in making the declaration. Only, as I have said, fortunately or unfortunately, I know more of the world in general and of Mr. Geoffrey Herriard in particular than does that person himself. No, my dear fellow,"—there was a revolting irony in the term—"when I am a great man, a very great man, as, bar accidents, I mean to be, it would be a quite irresistible temptation to one like yourself to shake the ladder just as I had reached the topmost rung. Don't protest; I know human nature. The temptation would be overpowering—I don't mean to blackmail; I put you above that—but to stand, virtuously, public-spiritedly, of course, in my way. And it might not be as easy to put you to silence on that day as it is now. A man is a fool who starts to climb the highest ladder, leaving at the foot a fellow who has the power, and, maybe, the inclination, to twist it over."

Herriard kept wondering why he did not make an end of his talk.

"So you know, or think you know," Gastineau went on coolly, "that Martindale owed his death to me?"

"I know nothing," Herriard protested, with the vision of Alexia before his eyes.

"You have at least a strong suspicion, which is sufficient for my purpose. A suspicion shared by that astute and able officer, Detective Inspector Quickjohn. Ah! I am sorry for you both, but you will recognize that it would be sheer folly on my part to enter the race handicapped by the extra and unnecessary weight of a suspicion of murder."

His tone was so blandly reflective that Herriard regarded him in surprise; half wondering whether he was in his right senses. Nothing but the dangling revolver suggested a dread intent.

"Gastineau," he said, steadying his voice, dry and strange from the desperate fear that was in him, "you are hideously wrong in thinking me likely to communicate my suspicions to any living creature. And you must be out of your mind to imagine that taking my life, if that is your meaning, will clear the way to the goal you aim at. Do you, clever man that you are, suppose that you can kill me with impunity? That my murder will not turn suspicion into a certainty leading to the gallows."

Gastineau listened with an indulgent smile. "I imagine nothing of the kind, my good Herriard," he returned. "In the first place I am not exactly going to kill you."

"Ah!"

"No. You are going within the next few minutes to take your own life, being burdened by the idea of a false position, at a moment when I shall be able to prove if necessary that Paul Gastineau was many hundred miles away."

There was murder in the face now, and Herriard set his own as he saw it.

"You think so? "

With the recklessness of desperation, now that the passing hope had vanished, he could almost chaff the man who announced his doom.

"I am sure of it."

"You have a mighty confidence in yourself as a layer of plans, but you have overlooked one circumstance which will surely bring you to the scaffold."

"Indeed? What is that? "

"Think."

"I am in the habit of thinking, as you should be aware. And know that I have overlooked nothing."

"Do you mean to murder the Countess Alexia as well? " Herriard's voice half broke as he pronounced the name, and he knew that his enemy noticed it.

"Scarcely," Gastineau answered, with his air of superior wisdom. "If you call the circumstance of her being alive a danger, it is one that I mean to turn into a means of safety. You were good enough just now to tell me to think. Let deep thought in turn point out to shallow surmise that the very factor you have alluded to in the case is in reality one which makes your death imperative. If one may take your look for one of incredulity, I will explain."

"If you please." Was there no chance? Herriard was searching desperately for one as he spoke mechanically, his life passing before him in a swift panorama while he temporized with the inevitable.

Gastineau proceeded, speaking as casually as though he were telling a story in a club smoking-room. "The only person, besides myself, who knows the real truth of the *affaire* Martindale is the Countess Alexia. She knows it because, as you may be aware, I have told her what happened. Apart from shrewd suspicion and fairy tales, conjectures, which, as we know, go for nothing in the Law Courts, what the Countess knows is the only tangible piece of evidence which could condemn me for, say, manslaughter. There are two ways of securing myself against the appearance of the Countess in the box against me; the more agreeable of the two is to marry her. But that is at the moment impossible owing to a slight obstacle, the fact that the lady is, I believe, at present your wife. Now, perhaps you begin to take in the situation?"

Herriard's brain was busy with futile searching for a way out of it. He at least took in his adversary's fixity of purpose. He nodded gloomily in reply. Argument was now clearly out of the question. The resolve of a man who glories aggressively in his intellect is merely clenched by opposition.

"Then, apart from the Countess's widowhood being a *sine quâ non*," Gastineau continued, in the same cold, level tone, "there is the account of our rivalship to be settled. That has been held throughout the ages to be a more than sufficient reason for bloodshed, for a fight *â outrance.* There has never been room in the world, even when it was less crowded, for two lovers of the same lady. The angle of love is now acute, now obtuse; it is never a triangle."

"It has," Herriard retorted, "always been the world's code in such cases for rivals to meet and settle the matter on fair and equal terms."

Gastineau smiled.

"Not always, by any means, my dear Herriard. Your history is at fault. In fact it has almost invariably and proverbially been the custom for a rival to take any advantage that chance might offer him. Duels on so-called equal terms, for there really never was such a thing, have been resorted to only where other means of elimination were not practicable, or where one of the parties was smart and skilful, the other a chivalrous, incompetent fool. I don't take my history from the story-books."

"The fool," Herriard urged hopelessly, "had at least a chance, if a poor one. He was not butchered in cold blood."

Gastineau shrugged.

"The fool had the satisfaction of dying with a weapon in his hand, against which advantage must be set the fact that he left behind him the reputation of not knowing how to use it. But, my good fellow, when you talk of advantage, surely you, who, when I was crippled, had such a pull over me, are not going to complain now that the tables are turned and the balance properly adjusted in the proportion of our respective intellects."

"If," Herriard returned, touched to justify himself, "I took advantage of your condition, it was, as you know, unwittingly."

"I grant you that," Gastineau assented readily. "But when the position was readjusted—for I would not have played the dog-in-the-manger—and your mistake was pointed out, you refused to correct it. You cannot deny you were warned; but it was to no purpose. It were idle to argue that the lady prefers you; that is merely an additional reason for your removal."

He rose with an action as though to throw the end of his cigarette over the parapet, but checked it cunningly, to drop the stub of tobacco on the floor, and stamp it to atoms. Herriard understood the astuteness that meant to leave no incriminating evidence of its presence. Then Gastineau, with a passing scrutiny of the revolver, raised his eyes to Herriard's face.

"Time is up," he said incisively, with an ominous squaring of the jaw. "I have given you, as between man and man—I was going to say, old friends—my reasons, more sufficient, perhaps, than agreeable. After all, under the veneer of civilization, the rough, barbaric sense of self-preservation is to-day as firmly existent as ever. You have played a risky game, Herriard, and have lost it."

He paused, looking at Herriard as though he expected him to make some reply. For a few moments the two men stood gazing into each other's eyes; and there was death in both. The sun had sunk below the level of the massed pine-trees, and now flooded the long avenue with blood-red light. To Herriard, in that supreme moment, in the exaltation of his senses, the sounds of the forest came with abnormal distinctness. The whole affair seemed a dream, even to his, its victim's, tantalizing helplessness. Gastineau, with all his set malignity of purpose indexed in his hateful face, seemed unreal. Herriard made a desperate effort to tell himself of his danger, of his mad folly in submitting tamely to his death like a decrepit hound. At least it was better to die in an attacking rush than passively standing still. He would accept his fate no more than its justice.

As he gathered his nerves for a spring which he knew must be into eternity, since the deadly barrel covered him steadily, pitilessly, he was surprised, so far as anything could touch him then, to see Gastineau turn half away with a curiously apprehensive change of countenance. Now or never was his chance. He gave a great leap forward to throw himself upon his enemy. Gastineau, turning quickly from what had drawn off his attention, sprang aside with a devilish gleam of combat in his eyes, and raised the revolver. He fired; but Herriard, at close quarters now, had clutched his arm, and the bullet went wide. Next moment, with a sharp jerk, Gastineau had torn himself free from the grasp, and, with a great backward spring, reached a practicable firing distance. As the revolver was swiftly brought down to the aim, and Herriard was madly throwing himself upon his death, there came, though neither of the men more than vaguely noticed it, a sound as of a leaping rush; then the angry, attacking snarl of a dog; and next instant Gastineau was flung staggering against the parapet, with the wolf-hound, Fritz's fangs gripping his throat. Then, in a moment, he rallied from the shock and surprise, and, bringing the muzzle of his revolver to the dog's breast, he fired. With a savage howl and a convulsive effort the animal, who had for the instant relaxed his hold, darted his head forward in a renewed attack. With his left hand trying to thrust back the dog, and his face working with rage and pain, Gastineau raised the revolver to cover Herriard who was trying for an opening to seize his enemy. As he did so, the half ruinous masonry of the parapet, against which man and dog were pressing, yielded to their weight. It gave way; and, with a cry, Gastineau and Fritz went over, falling with the crushing masonry sheer forty feet on to the flagstones which were set round the tower.

"Gastineau, with a great backward spring, reached a practical firing distance."

The Master Spirit] [*Page 318*

With a swift sense of relief at his deliverance, Herriard, trembling from the horror of the business, looked over the edge of the tower. Below, where they had fallen, lay man and dog in their blood, and without sign of life. Gastineau's grey face, with eyes that, through the mean disguise, seemed to glare up at him with a vindictiveness that death could not kill, was the face of a dead man. Herriard instinctively knew that. He drew back, and went softly down the winding stairs of the tower. On a table in the lower room lay his gun. The cartridges had been extracted. He slipped others in, and went outside.

The first thing he saw was his revolver which Gastineau had made him throw away. He took it up, and went on round the tower towards the place he dreaded. There they lay; his enemy and his preserver; still, as only they lie who will never move again. A glance now sufficed to tell Herriard that his fears were at an end.

Nerving himself with the remembrance of his late danger, he stooped and raised Gastineau's head, the head that had plotted such evil against him, and which now lay twisted unnaturally away from his shoulders; then he gently let it rest on the stones again. The dead man's neck was broken. Bar accidents, he had said; and already, by a swift, dramatic stroke, the accident had come. Fate had, in an instant, brushed away the carefully spun web of the ambitious, relentless schemer. With a sigh, and with a caressing touch for poor Fritz, Herriard turned from the shattered abode of that master-spirit who had been so strangely both friend and enemy such as few men have owned; and took his way towards home and Alexia, a free man.

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